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In Her Own Words: A Comparative Analysis of Medieval Women's Mysticism in Christianity and Hinduism

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In Her Own Words: A Comparative Analysis of Women's Medieval Mysticism in Christianity
and Hinduism

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Social Studies
of Bard College

by
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Introduction

The role of women in religious spaces has always been a difficult one to negotiate. Across the Abrahamic religions, as well as in Buddhism and Hinduism, it is a simple fact that women have had to access God in ways which are different from the ways of men. Whether this is due to restrictions on access to rituals, textual decrees against women practicing religion, or a generally negative cultural attitude toward women and literacy, all of these major religions have historically made it very challenging for a woman to make a place for herself within her community and recorded religious history. Despite this, there is one period of time which stands out as having had an overwhelming number of women taking an active role in their experience of religion, particularly in the use of their own voices and language. In the central middle ages, reports of visionary, ecstatic, or “mystical” women grew to a level never before seen and never again replicated. Through their visions and outpourings, these women were able to wield positions of power in their religious communities and earn the qualified support of their male counterparts. Well documented in books such as *Holy Feast and Holy Fast* by Caroline Walker Bynum and *Visions and Longings* by Monica Furlong, these women have been of interest to theological scholars for several decades now. However, the question of why and how these women were able to retain religious agency through language while other women were kept silent has not been explored in as much depth.

In both Christianity and Hinduism, the 12th through 14th century was a time defined by the experience of women. During this time, the development of affective piety or spirituality was spreading rapidly in and around Europe. First written about extensively by Richard W. Southern in his book, “The Making of the Middle Ages,”¹ he suggested that a twelfth century shift towards communities of individuals practicing religion in solitude, reflected in monastic movements such

¹ R. W. Southern, *The Making of the Middle Ages* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).

as the Cistercian model, allowed for more personal, “affected” experiences of religion. This resulted in religious writings and artistry which glorified self-reflection and compassion for others and oneself. Southern writes, “The urge towards a greater measure of solitude, of introspection and self-knowledge which is exemplified by St. Anselm in the bosom of the Benedictine order in the eleventh century ran like fire through Europe in the generation after his death and produced an outburst of meditations and spiritual soliloquies.”² Marked by the humanity of Christ, self-love and reflection, and a focus on the interior life, affective piety defined the twelfth century and the following two centuries, as seen in the rise of Francis of Assisi and the Franciscan model.³ Caroline Walker Bynum qualifies this notion of the individual at the core of affective piety in her book *Jesus as Mother* in a chapter titled “Did the Twelfth Century Discover the Individual?” in which she concludes, “If the religious writing, the religious practice, and the religious orders of the twelfth century are characterized by a new concern for the ‘inner man,’ it is *because* of a new concern for the group, for types and examples, for the ‘outer man.’”⁴ This tension between the cultivation of the individual and the archetypes of the group is often found at the heart of mysticism from the central middle ages.

Some of the clearest examples of affective piety at this time can be found in the growth of art and writing depicting women and Christ, particularly visible in Marian devotion. Marian devotion can be understood as an expression of affective piety as it emphasizes the bodily aspects of both Mary and Christ, as well as focusing on their interior life together. Southern points this out, stating that while art depicting Mary with her seated child was the most common depiction of Mary up until this point, in the twelfth century, “it was joined by many other forms

² Southern, *The Making of the Middle Ages*, 227.

³ Anne Clark Bartlett and Thomas H. Bestul, eds., *Cultures of Piety: Medieval English Devotional Literature in Translation* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), 2.

⁴ Caroline Walker Bynum, *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages*, 1. paperback pr, Publications of the Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, UCLA 16 (Berkeley, Calif.: Univ. of California Press, 1984), 85.

which expressed the more intimate inclinations of later medieval piety, such as the laughing Child, the Child playing with an apple or ball, the Child caressing its Mother, or the Child being fed from its Mother's breast." (238).⁵ The maternal nature and generosity of Mary is highlighted in these artworks, reflecting the values which the growing cult of Marian devotees worshiped at this time. Churches and monasteries dedicated to Mary grew in large numbers during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, particularly inspired by the writings of Saint Bernard of Clairvaux who imagined her as the Bride of the Song of Songs in the Old Testament.⁶

Christian affective piety in the central middle ages has been suggested by some to be, most essentially, a performance of femininity. In her book *Affective Meditation and the Invention of Medieval Compassion*, Sarah McNamer writes, "This book's conclusions about the origins of affective meditation, the operative rules of the genre, and the social and political functions of these texts circle around a core configuration: to perform compassion—in the private drama of the heart that these texts stage—is to feel like a woman."⁷ In *Jesus as Mother*, Bynum points to the values of motherhood in particular as being venerated in both men and women. She quotes a sermon of Bernard of Clairvaux's in which he stated, "Learn that you must be mothers to those in your care, not masters... Be gentle, avoid harshness, do not resort to blows, expose your breasts: let your bosoms expand with milk not swell with passion."⁸ In contrast with the aggressive temper of men who "swell with passion" and teach with a stern hand, the gentle teaching and nurturing of a mother to her child became the ideal model for instructing others in Christianity. Despite this, women were still unequivocally denied access to preaching or

⁵ Southern, *The Making of the Middle Ages*, 238.

⁶ Department of Medieval Art and The Cloisters, 'The Cult of the Virgin Mary in the Middle Ages | Essay | The Metropolitan Museum of Art | Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History', *The Met's Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*, accessed 27 April 2023, https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/virg/hd_virg.htm.

⁷ Sarah McNamer, *Affective Meditation and the Invention of Medieval Compassion* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), 3.

⁸ Bynum, 'Avoiding the Tyranny of Morphology; or, Why Compare?', 118.

instructing others in any way, as will be discussed in greater detail below. Demonstrated by these trends in devotion, writing, and artistry, Christianity, beginning in the twelfth century, can certainly be described as venerating a feminine form of worship which focused on mother-like compassion and the cultivation of internal life.

At this same time in Southern Asia, a parallel movement highlighting the individual and emotional experiences of religion was rapidly growing as well. The Bhakti movement, beginning in the sixth century and reaching its peak in the fifteenth century, allowed for the experiences of the individual in relation to God to be centered in an unprecedented way. This was not an organized series of changes, but a centuries-long mass movement away from the systematic practices of Vedic and Brahmanical Hinduism. While this was a deeply unstructured and massive movement, it was generally characterized by devotion, often towards one God or Goddess in particular, a rejection of Brahman authority, including the caste system, and a focus on the lived experience, or *anubhava*, defined by Mukunda Rao in his book *Sky-Clad* as, “the unmediated experience of truth.”⁹ In his article, “Rebels-Conformists? Women Saints in Medieval South India,” Vijaya Ramaswamy describes the Bhakti movement, stating, “The Bhakti movement in India, by and large, was marked by the rejection of the existing ritual hierarchy and Brahmanical superiority; the use of the vernacular in preference to Sanskrit (the language of the elite); and the emergence of low-caste, non-literate persons as great spiritual leaders.”¹⁰ All of these attributes seem to suggest that this would be a time of unrestricted religious exploration for women.

However, as will be explored further later on, patriarchal structures still managed to find their

⁹ Mukunda Rao, *Sky-Clad: The Extraordinary Life and Times of Akka Mahadevi* (Chennai: Westland Publications Private Limited, 2018), xix.

¹⁰ Vijaya Ramaswamy, ‘Rebels — Conformists? Women Saints in Medieval South India’, *Anthropos* 87, no. 1/3 (1992): 133, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40462578>.

way into these seemingly egalitarian groups, restricting the actual experiences of women, while the appropriation of women's voices and stories by men expanded more and more.

In this study, I focus in particular on Shaivism, the worship of Shiva, looking at mystics from Karnataka Virashaivism and Kashmir Shaivism, both of which take a more monistic approach than many other Hindu sects. Mukunda Rao describes Virashaivism in his book *Sky-Clad* writing, "The new kind of Shaivism, founded by Basavanna, came to be called 'Virashaivism' in the 15th century. It was derived from the Virashaivas, the brave or heroic devotees of Shiva, and a creative mix of Buddhist and Hindu philosophies as well as Kashmir Shaivism, combined with a critique of brahmanism from within Hinduism." (35).¹¹ Deeply concerned with social injustices and caste, the Virashaivism founded by Basavanna in the twelfth century was thus characterized by community and anti-discrimination. However, Virashaivism still focused particularly on the individual experience of the mind and body in each devotee, as emphasized by the linga, or ishtalinga. The ishtalinga, a smooth stone representing Shiva wrapped in cloth or set in a metal casket, was worn on the body, in contrast to the "sthavara linga," the fixed linga which was installed in temples.¹² By moving ritual from inside the temple to constantly taking place in one's body, Virashaivism allowed for the individual to construct their own experience of religion while still understanding the interconnectedness of all things.

Kashmir Shaivism, on the other hand, had its own vast network of schools, each with their own set of practices and beliefs. Despite this, there is still an "integral monism" running through Kashmir Shaivism which reconciles the self with everything in nature. In his book *The Doctrine of Vibration* Mark S. G. Dyczkowski describes this "integral monism," stating, "Although varied and constantly changing, all that lies in the sphere of objectivity shares a

¹¹ Rao, *Sky-Clad*, 35.

¹² Rao, *Sky-Clad*, 39.

common nature. All thoughts, perceptions or physical phenomena are equally part of the play of nature- Prakṛti- which manifests in this way to fulfill the need of the Person for phenomenal experience.”¹³ In this way, Kashmir Shaivism also highlights the individual experience of the body, finding that the thoughts and experiences of every individual’s life are a part of the divine play of nature which one can bear witness to and enter into if they attune themselves accordingly by devoting themselves to Shiva.

The affective piety of Virashaivism and Kashmir Shaivism produced many poet-saints, individuals who documented their experiences of Shiva through poetic outpourings. In these sects, as well as others in the Bhakti movement, to experience a coupled union with Shiva was the highest status one could reach. The act of reaching union with Shiva is understood as reflecting the perfect union Shiva has with Shakti –his feminine aspect, or his wife in some sects– which is understood to embody the unity of all things. In Vaishnavism, this idea was specifically manifested as being a bride of the Lord, regardless of the devotees gender. In his essay “Men, Women, and Saints,” A.K Ramanujan writes, “The male saint yearns to achieve a woman’s state in his society, so that he can yearn for and couple with God.”¹⁴ As such, many of the male bhakti poet-saints of this time take on a feminine perspective from which they write their devotional poetry. A poem by Basavanna, founder of the Virashaiva movement in Karnataka, exemplifies this: “Look here, dear fellow: /I wear these men’s clothes/ only for you,/ sometimes I am man,/ sometimes I am woman./ O Lord Kudalasangamadeva/ I’ll make wars for you/ but I’ll be your devotees’ bride.”¹⁵ Kabir, a later Bhakti poet from the 15th century takes this even further, writing in a poem translated by Ravindranath Tagore, “My body and my mind

¹³ Mark S. G. Dyczkowski, *The Doctrine of Vibration: An Analysis of the Doctrines and Practices of Kashmir Shaivism*, SUNY Series in the Shaiva Traditions of Kashmir (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), 33.

¹⁴ A. K. Ramanujan, *The Collected Essays of A.K. Ramanujan*, ed. Vinay Dharwadker (New Delhi ; New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 290.

¹⁵ Rao, *Sky-Clad*, 112.

are grieved for the want of Thee; /O my Beloved! come to my house. /When people say I am Thy bride, I am ashamed; /for I have not touched Thy heart with my heart.”¹⁶ As these writings demonstrate, the patriarchal understanding of a wife as being devoted to her husband and emotionally consumed by this relationship was understood as the ideal representation of one’s devotion to Shiva and, thus, taking on the mindset of a woman was understood as being conducive to experiencing union with Shiva.

With both Christianity and Hinduism experiencing movements towards affective piety which allowed for unprecedented individual exploration, as well as aspiring toward certain feminine attributes, one would expect women in both cultures to have experienced extensive freedoms within their religious communities. However, the influx of women responding to these new groups and seeming egalitarianism was soon recognized by male religious authorities and restrictions were very quickly put in place to limit the ability for these women to share their experiences. The impact of this can be seen in the centuries that follow the fourteenth century where mysticism written by women dropped extremely rapidly.¹⁷ This makes the twelfth through fourteenth centuries a particularly rich period of time for the analysis of female mysticism, as it included both unprecedented numbers of religious women, as well as the rise of restrictions put into place specifically responding to this increase.

There is tangible evidence of the radical increase in women practicing religion during this time, particularly in Europe. According to Bynum, “recent scholarly investigations, both of actually canonized saints and of those who were simply popularly revered, suggest that the proportion of female saints rose from less than 10 percent in the eleventh century to about 28 percent in the fifteenth.” (Bynum, 20)¹⁸. The various explanations for this exponential increase

¹⁶ Kabir, *One Hundred Poems of Kabir*, ed. Rabindranath Tagore (London: Macmillan and Co., Limited, 1915), 41.

¹⁷ Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, 22–23.

¹⁸ Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, 20.

have been studied extensively by other scholars, but these will not be covered in this project. Regardless, this explosion of women in the Church was certainly felt by the men who held positions of authority and wished to prevent them from calling their own power into question. Orders against women preaching were the most significant and universal restriction, with canonist Bernard of Parma declaring in 1245 that, “in general, the office of a man is forbidden to women.”¹⁹ Additionally, the fact that these mystic women commonly experienced visions and told prophecies was treated with greater suspicion in the following centuries as the popular fifteenth century notion of the witch spread across Europe. Bynum concludes that by the fifteenth century, “Woman’s religious role as inspired vessel had come to seem utterly different from man’s role as priest, preacher, and leader by virtue of clerical office.”²⁰ As will be explored further, the women writing mysticism during this time of great transition and restriction in the twelfth through fourteenth centuries used this idea of themselves as “inspired vessels” in order to claim the agency and authority to speak about God, despite their status as women.

Similarly, in both Karnataka Virashaivism and Kashmir Shaivism, the patriarchal structures which both India and Kashmir were based in still managed to inform the lives of those in socially reformist groups. While these sects of Hinduism, along with many others, claimed for there to be no substantive differences between men and women, actual restrictions on ritual and guru access for women demonstrates what J.Z Smith, in his article “The Bare Facts of Ritual,” calls a gap: “an incongruity between their ideological statements of how they *ought* to,” perform their religious beliefs, and, “their actual behavior.”²¹ This gap can most clearly be seen in the fact that women were not allowed to reach the final initiation stage of guru, similar to the restrictions

¹⁹ Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, 21-22.

²⁰ Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, 23.

²¹ Jonathan Z. Smith, ‘The Bare Facts of Ritual’, *History of Religions* 20, no. 1/2 (1980): 123, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1062338>.

placed on women preaching in Christianity. Vijaya Ramaswamy describes this in his book *Walking Naked: Women, Society, Spirituality in South India*, in which he writes, “Women within Virasaivism had almost all the rights to a spiritual life with one notable exception. They were not conceded the Jangama status which meant that women could neither conduct priestly ceremonies nor become head of a Virasaiva mutt or religious organization.” (155).²² While Kashmir Shaivism was less structured in this way, there are no recorded female gurus, theologians, or philosophers from this period in Kashmir which suggest that they believed or practiced otherwise.

In his book *Siva's Saints*, Gil Ben-Herut argues that the popular scholarly understanding of twelfth century Virashaivism as “egalitarian” or even “proto-feminist” is problematic, “because the significations implied by this term and similar ones are steeped in Western and modern value systems.”²³ In actuality, Ben-Herut claims, rather than one’s background being completely transcended by worship of Shiva and the linga, “a devotee’s social traits—his or her social class, gender, religious and sectarian affiliation, familial heritage and customs, economic background, profession, and so on—can play a substantial role in his or her engagement with other members of the devotional community.”²⁴ As such, women were often restricted to the position of being the wife of a guru or, in the case of women who spurned marriage, completely isolated renunciation once they had transcended the need for a guru but could not be granted access to becoming gurus themselves.

As demonstrated by these practices and popular themes in both Christianity and Hinduism, particularly Virashaivism and Kashmir Shaivism, the central middle ages were a

²² Vijaya Ramaswamy, *Walking Naked: Women, Society, Spirituality in South India* (Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 1997), 155.

²³ Gil Ben-Herut, *Siva's Saints*, (Oxford University Press, 2018), 94, doi:10.1093/oso/9780190878849.001.0001.

²⁴ Ben-Herut, *Siva's Saints*, 94.

period where the emotional experiences and subordinate status of women were understood as being conducive to one's experience of God. However, at the same time, the unpredictable and uneducated nature of women also led to restrictions being placed on women sharing their own lived experiences as preachers or gurus. This resulted in women being granted a very specific role in their religious spaces where their subordination was understood to serve a divine purpose. Notably, however, it is men's writing that took on and popularized this notion of women as lower, subordinate, more emotional and, thus, closer to God. When women took this notion into their own hands and began to use this understanding of themselves as subordinate and thus closer to God in their own writings, the result is mysticism which deeply challenges the religious and societal order of things through their wielding of religious language. For this reason, mysticism written by women at this time holds great significance in understanding the medieval religious landscape and the ways in which women at this time negotiated their experiences of God.

Looking closely at four mystics from this period –Hildegard of Bingen, Mechthild of Magdeburg, Mahadeviyakka, and Lalla– I will first examine the biographical and hagiographical accounts of their lives, as well as briefly discussing the recurring themes and images present in their writings. Following this, I look towards the philosophy of Jacques Lacan and Julia Kristeva to conceive of a new way of understanding the language of female mystics. Placing an emphasis on Kristeva's conception of the semiotic, I suggest that these women were unified by their semiotic approach to religious poetry which understood their own body as a microcosm of the earth, rendered ritual practices internal processes, and venerated madness as indicative of their profound connection with God. By wielding these patriarchal ideas of womanhood as bodily, emotional, and consumed by either love or madness in their own language, these women radically subvert the typical understanding of these ideas, finding a kind of power and method of

accessing God which men could not claim as readily. By using the language of the semiotic, these women could enter the cultural and historical world of the symbolic.

It can be hard to conceive of these women as real flesh and blood people due to the extreme nature of hagiographical accounts and the saintly status which has been granted to some of them. All we have left of who these women were is their words which have been passed down through generations. Though translation and time take us further and further from the original meaning of the text, the spirit of these women is still carried in every word. The sheer strength and courage of these women in taking on the role of poet or writer in a religious setting cannot be understated. While secular society completely restricted the creative work of women and religious society prevented them from leading or teaching others, their internal experiences of God allowed them to reach creative heights in mysticism the likes of which had never been seen before. By examining these women in their own words, one sees how femininity can act as an agent of power and understanding within the religious world. Placing their femininity at the forefront of their mysticism through their language, rather than in their imagery or content, these women made a space for themselves in the medieval religious landscape which has not been forgotten many centuries later.

Chapter One: The Women

a. Hildegard of Bingen

In the history of mysticism, Hildegard of Bingen has consistently emerged as a woman both distinctly of her time and many centuries ahead of it. A Benedictine abbess, visionary, composer, philosopher and medical writer, Hildegard stands out against the typical image of the female anchorite, locked in a cell with no one but God to keep her company. On the contrary, Hildegard wielded a shocking amount of authority over others, opening and running her own nunneries, working with male monks to facilitate the production of her illuminations, and communicating with numerous popes and emperors throughout her lifetime, often to chastise them for what she viewed as non-pious behavior. In this way, Hildegard is distinct from the other female mystics I will be looking at, as she is the only one to become established in her lifetime, within her community, and within the religious tradition she followed. As Caroline Walker Bynum points out in her preface to Hildegard's book *Scivias*, "A Benedictine abbess, Hildegard advocated a monastic life of obedience and communal prayer— not the extravagant and individual asceticism of some later medieval women."²⁵ Further distinguishing Hildegard from other female mystics is her understanding of herself as a prophet of the Old Testament tradition, focusing her work on how humanity can receive salvation and using the writings of the Old Testament to support her visions. Despite these qualities which make Hildegard quite distinct amongst the religious women of her time, she was still a woman writing about God and, as such, her writing demonstrates the various negotiations she had to make in order to claim and maintain spiritual authority. Looking at the life of Hildegard gives us greater insight into these negotiations and how Hildegard understood herself both as a woman and a spiritual figure.

²⁵ Caroline Walker Bynum, 'Preface', in *Scivias*, by Hildegard, trans. Columbia Hart and Jane Bishop, *The Classics of Western Spirituality* (New York: Paulist Press, 1990), 2.

The images and visions described in *Scivias* set the stage for the following female mystics we will discuss. For the sake of brevity, I will only be looking at Hildegard's *Scivias*, a monumental text in its own right, as its focus on images allows for more fruitful comparison with the works of other image focused female mystics. For reference, I will be using the 1990 edition of *Scivias* translated by Mother Columba Hart and Jane Bishop in the hopes that translation by other mystically oriented women will allow the meaning of Hildegard's words to come through in their clearest and most faithful form.²⁶

The Life of Hildegard

As a saint, the life story of Hildegard has been greatly complicated by the nature of hagiography, the biographies of saints which were written by other religious figures, typically following the saint's death and focusing on the miraculous accounts of their life. Hildegard's hagiography, *Vita Sanctae Hildegardis*, was compiled by the monk Theoderic of Echternach after Hildegard's death. The hagiography had first been started by Godfrey of Disibodenberg, but was picked up by Theoderic after his death. The presence of multiple authors and the fact that it was written after Hildegard died indicates that certain details may be based more in anecdote than fact. However, we do know that Hildegard was the tenth child of Hildebert of Bermersheim and Mechtild of Merxheim and was born some time in 1098.²⁷ From the time she was born, Hildegard had been promised as a tithe or oblate to the Church. Fiona Maddocks describes this practice in her book *Hildegard of Bingen: The Woman of Her Age*, stating it was, "common among well-born, pious families, even those with fewer children from whom to choose."²⁸ While this may seem to indicate that devout life was assigned to Hildegard through no action of her

²⁶ Hildegard, *Scivias*, trans. Columbia Hart and Jane Bishop, *The Classics of Western Spirituality* (New York: Paulist Press, 1990).

²⁷ Fiona Maddocks, *Hildegard of Bingen: The Woman of Her Age*, 1st ed. in the United States of America (New York: Doubleday, 2001), xvii.

²⁸ Maddocks, *Hildegard of Bingen: The Woman of Her Age*, 18.

own, her Vita attributes her as saying, “I was only in my third year when I saw a heavenly light which made my soul tremble, but because I was a child I could not speak out.”²⁹ In *Scivias* as well, Hildegard asserts that she has had divine visions and physical experiences of God from a very young age, but kept these to herself until adulthood. Whether Hildegard’s family placed her in the church for financial, political, or spiritual reasons, it is clear that Hildegard took to monastic life quickly, joining the Disibodenberg Abbey as an oblate at age eight, taking the veil at fourteen, and becoming prioress by thirty eight.

Already highly regarded as a woman of great insight and leadership capabilities, Hildegard's reputation only grew when she began to share and transcribe her visions in 1141 at the age of forty two. Perhaps it was her new authoritative role of prioress that finally allowed Hildegard to feel secure enough in her position to share the visions which she had kept to herself since the age of three. It can not be overstated how unprecedented a visionary woman of this magnitude would be in this community where a woman’s piety was defined by her ability to remain silent. Fiona Maddocks emphasizes this, stating, “Following St Paul’s injunction, women were not allowed to preach. The ruling male clergy were understandably nervous of women finding a voice, quickly discrediting them as foolish, depraved witches suffering from hysteria. Accordingly, women were taught silence and humility as the only way to honor God.”³⁰ With this patriarchal authority looming, Hildegard allied herself with a male monk, Volmar, who would assist in transcribing *Scivias* and act as her loyal secretary until his death in 1173. Having an ally and secretary would prove deeply crucial for Hildegard who was plagued with sickness throughout her whole life and would require another person to transcribe her visions. This sickness has been written about extensively, by theologians as well as psychologists, some of

²⁹ Maddocks, *Hildegard of Bingen*, 15.

³⁰ Maddocks, *Hildegard of Bingen*, 59.

whom have retrospectively diagnosed Hildegard as a migraine sufferer.³¹ Whether this diagnosis is accurate or not says nothing about the actual content or language of Hildegard's writing and, as such, will not be relevant to the subject of this project.

Following *Scivias*, Hildegard would produce a body of work so large and varied in both content and structure that it is daunting for any scholar to attempt to summarize it all. Hildegard would go on to write the first musical morality play, *Ordo Virtutum*, or "Play of the Virtues," which depicts the Soul, a woman, and her conflict with the Virtues, also women, and the Devil, voiced by a man. She also produced two follow up books of visionary theology, *Liber Vitae Meritorum*, or Book of Life's Merits, composed between 1158 and 1163, and *Liber Divinorum Operum*, or Book of Divine Works, composed between 1163 and 1174. Following this, she would compose and write hundreds of liturgical chants and hymns, compiled in her *Symphonia Armoniae Celestium Revelationum*, or Symphony of the Harmony of Celestial Revelations. The sheer range of Hildegard's work, including plays, theology, music, and letters, exemplifies the multifaceted nature of Hildegard's religious expression and her utter devotion to sharing the word of God in all its forms. These works have been preserved in two major codexes produced while Hildegard was still alive, the Weisbaden and Dendermonde codexes, demonstrating the revered position she already held in the Church during her lifetime and the desire of historians and the Church to preserve her compositions.

Thematically, Hildegard is primarily concerned with mysticism surrounding the natural world, apocalyptic prophecies, and cosmic images of creation, understood through symbols such as fiery illumination, massive thrones, and mandalas composed of angels, humans, and biblical figures. She frequently returns to the idea of a divine flame or light which she claims was her

³¹ Katherine Foxhall, 'Making Modern Migraine Medieval: Men of Science, Hildegard of Bingen and the Life of a Retrospective Diagnosis', *Medical History* 58, no. 3 (July 2014): 354–74, doi:10.1017/mdh.2014.28.

first indication of God's presence in her. She writes in the declaration which begins *Scivias*, "when I was forty-two years and seven months old, Heaven was opened and a fiery light of exceeding brilliance came and permeated my whole brain, and inflamed my whole heart and my whole breast, not like a burning but like a warming flame, as the sun warms anything its rays touch."³² While Hildegard's writing frequently operates on a more cosmic level than that of the other mystics examined in this project, these cosmic experiences are always rooted in the experience of her own body and mind which has been "permeated" and "inflamed" by God in such a way that she must share it with others.

As modern readers, one struggles to imagine a life like Hildegard's. With no family at her side and no worldly distractions, one is struck by the isolation she appears to have experienced from the time she was born. Her life, as depicted by Hildegard herself, seems entirely devoid of any pleasure or contentment. She envisions God describing her, stating, "The world has had in her no joy or lewdness or use in worldly things, for I have withdrawn her from impudent boldness, and she feels fear and is timid in her works."³³ One has to wonder what it was that Hildegard feared, living in one of few communities in medieval Europe where women were not at constant risk of assault or other malfeasances by men. It seems that, even when removed from all worldly or gendered reasons for fear, the power of God over man still manages to instill fear in Hildegard. Through her *Scivias*, however, one sees how Hildegard comes to reconcile this fear with the extreme love, passion, pain and ecstasy she feels when in the presence of God. While this fear doesn't disappear in *Scivias*, with many of Hildegard's visions depicting apocalyptic horrors, death and demons, she finds a sense of beauty in this fear which reminds one of the overwhelming power God has as the one true means of salvation for humanity.

³² Hildegard, *Scivias*, 59.

³³ Hildegard, *Scivias*, 60.

b. Mechthild of Magdeburg

In a secluded monastery in Switzerland in 1860, nearly five hundred years after the life of Mechthild of Magdeburg, author and priest Carl Greith sought to find supplementary materials for his book, *History of German Mysticism*. Here, at the Library of the Monastery of Einsiedeln, Greith would uncover the first, and only, complete codex of Mechthild's book *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*. The codex had ended up there due to the extraordinary devotion of one Heinrich of Nordlingen who translated her work from low to high German and sent them to monasteries and nunneries across Europe. Attached to one of these copies he wrote a note which stated, "I am led to do this by the living light of the radiant love of Christ, for to me, this book, in delightful and vigorous German, is the most moving love-poem I have ever read in our tongue."³⁴ One can hardly imagine how Greith must have felt unearthing these long forgotten pages, but it is due to his unexpected discovery that we now have access to the life's work of Mechthild of Magdeburg who spent nearly forty years writing the epic love story of her experience of Christ.

Mechthild is strikingly different from the other mystics who we examine in this project. While she states in her own book that she had her first experience of Christ at age twelve, she did not abandon her family and enter religious life until she was at least twenty three and did not start transcribing her visions and poetry until she was in her forties.³⁵ She never belonged to one group, living with beguine and Cistercian nuns and seemingly never taking any formal vows. Despite this, Mechthild's writing is characterized by a passion and unending devotion one might normally associate with a girl in her youth. She does not shy away from worldly imagery of court life and romance, instead incorporating it into her understanding of union with Christ. It could be said that Mechthild's main mode of interpreting Christ is through love, which it always comes

³⁴ Lucy Menzies, 'Introduction', in *The Revelations of Mechthild of Magdeburg (1210-1297): Or, The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, by Mechthild (of Magdeburg) (Martino Publishing, 2012, xxiii).

³⁵ Mechthild (of Magdeburg), *The Revelations of Mechthild of Magdeburg (1210-1297)*, 94.

back to in her theology. With this understanding in mind, Mechthild finds all suffering, in both the body and the soul, to be an exercise in feeling God's love. The images in *The Flowing Light of the Godhead* demonstrate the way Mechthild found love in suffering and, in suffering, found a method of ascending worldly corruption and reaching blissful union with God. For reference, I use Lucy Menzies' translation of *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*,³⁶ again with the hopes that Menzies, as a woman who similarly spent her life dedicated to documenting the spiritual experience, will be able to most truthfully maintain the spirit of Mechthild in her translation.

The Life of Mechthild

There has been relatively little written about Mechthild's upbringing and personal life outside of her own written work. Unlike other mystics looked at in this project, she does not have a hagiography or any dedicated male counterpart who documented her life story. Thus, we must take her at her own word, while still keeping in mind the ambiguity and inconclusive nature of the dates and locations Mechthild mentions.

According to Lucy Menzies in the introduction to her translation of *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, "She was born in 1210 somewhere in the Archbishopric of Magdeburg, and from her language, her references to Court life, her culture, as well as the freedom and independence of her spirit, we infer that she came of noble or at least well-born parents."³⁷ This may explain how Mechthild was able to remain unmarried for so long, as her family's financial situation was not dependent on her marrying well. While Mechthild must have received some education which allowed her to read and write, she still refers to herself as, "the simplest creature who ever appeared in the spiritual life," and claims she, "knew nothing of God except the usual Christian

³⁶ Mechthild (of Magdeburg), *The Revelations of Mechthild of Magdeburg (1210-1297): Or, The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, trans. Lucy Menzies (Martino Publishing, 2012).

³⁷ Lucy Menzies, 'Introduction', in *The Revelations of Mechthild of Magdeburg (1210-1297): Or, The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, by Mechthild (of Magdeburg) (Martino Publishing, 2012), xvii.

beliefs.”³⁸ This fact further distinguishes Mechthild from the other mystics who have been examined thus far who all came from families which were notably devout in some form or another. Mechthild’s lack of religious education comes through in the structure of her book which is divided not by chapters or visions, but seemingly her own instinctual sense of how it should be organized, separating parts of the book by writing, “This is the first part of the book,” “This is the second part of the book,” and so on.

Mechthild describes the reception of her first vision at age twelve, stating, “I, unworthy sinner, was greeted so overpoweringly by the Holy Spirit in my twelfth year when I was alone, that I could no longer have given way to any serious daily sin. The loving greeting came every day and caused me both love and sorrow; the sweetness and glory increased daily and this continued for thirty-one years.”³⁹ The fact that Mechthild describes this greeting as happening when she was alone demonstrates how she must have lived and experienced God up until entering religious life at age 23. While other mystics often describe the reactions of their family and neighbors to their visions of God, Mechthild seems to have kept them wholly to herself. She would keep these visions private while they increased in intensity until, thirty one years after her first encounter, she began transcribing them at age 43. These thirty years of Mechthild’s “private relationship” with God deeply informs her work, as she writes as one who has known her lover for decades and feels assured that her lover recognizes her as well.

Before this, however, Mechthild first had to leave behind her family, choosing to enter a beguine community in Magdeburg where she knew no one. According to Marcelle Thiebaut in *The Writings of Medieval Women*, “At twenty-three she left her family to be nearer to God, living

³⁸ Mechthild (of Magdeburg), *The Revelations of Mechthild of Magdeburg (1210-1297)*, 94.

³⁹ Mechthild (of Magdeburg), *The Revelations of Mechthild of Magdeburg (1210-1297)*, 94.

in relative obscurity as a beguine in Magdeburg.”⁴⁰ These years with the beguines would deeply impact Mechthild’s writing and established her as a different kind of religious figure, choosing to live outside of normal Christian structures at this time. Thiebaut describes the beguines as groups of women which “took no religious vows, embraced no order or specific rule, and sought no authority from the church.” The movement originated from a priest named Lambert le Begue who advocated for female only communities which would care for the poor and sick without having to take irrevocable vows.⁴¹ These female-only communities differed wildly from the more rigid nunneries and monastic communities in which Hildegard lived. While Hildegard had the backing of male clergy to support the validity of her visions, Mechthild had no such proponents.

These beguine communities would thrive, despite papal disapproval, specifically due to the need they met for women who wanted to practice piety and live a life of relative peace without following the strict restrictions of convents. Bynum describes the distinct qualities of the beguine communities which attracted so many women in *Holy Feast and Holy Fast* where she writes, “their practices contrasted sharply with traditional monasticism, since they took no formal vows and had no complex organization or rules, no order linking the houses, no hierarchy of officials, no wealthy founders or leaders.”⁴² In this less rigid and more accepting community, Mechthild was able to write on a much more personal, critical, and intimate level than Hildegard, although on a much smaller scale than the prolific level of work which Hildegard produced.

While freedom of expression may have been Mechthild’s reason for joining the beguine community, her view of the Church as corrupt also may have prevented her from making vows to one specific rule. This is made overwhelmingly clear throughout *The Flowing Light of the*

⁴⁰ Marcelle Thiébaux, ed., *The Writings of Medieval Women*, Garland Library of Medieval Literature, v. 14. Series B (New York: Garland Pub, 1987), 207.

⁴¹ Menzies, ‘*The Revelations of Mechthild of Magdeburg (1210-1297)*’, xviii.

⁴² Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, 17.

Godhead, perhaps most explicitly in the sixth part of the book where she writes, “O crown of Holy Church, how dim art thou become! Thy precious stones have fallen (the rulers and holy doctors) because thou dost wound and injure holy Christian faith,” and concluding, “If any one is ignorant of the way to Hell, let him look at the depraved priesthood... hastening without let to the nether regions”⁴³ These statements, amongst others, brought much negative attention to Mechthild. According to Menzies, “Mechthild’s outspoken denunciation of those abuses led to her persecution; for a time she was deprived of her Communion and of the Daily Offices in Choir; it was rumoured that she was a heretic because of her writings.”⁴⁴ The fact that today Mechthild is celebrated as a saint in local calendars of the Roman rite demonstrates how it was precisely Mechthild’s refusal to ignore the corruption of the clergy and papacy during her lifetime which kept her from being as well received and documented as Hildegard.

Mechthild wrote the first six parts of *The Flowing Light of the Godhead* during this time with the beguines. At some point, having contracted illness and rapidly losing sight, she left Magdeburg to settle down and retire. According to Menzies, “she sought refuge in the Cistercian Convent of Helfde in Saxony (probably about 1285).”⁴⁵ Menzies describes the ethos of the convent, stating, “Like all Cistercian houses influenced by the teaching of St. Bernard, Helfde taught that the contemplative must bring back from intercourse with God, strength and food for other souls.”⁴⁶ Perhaps with this in her mind, Mechthild refused retirement, instead having her sisters transcribe the seventh and final part of *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, which she delivered to them orally, as her blindness prevented her from writing. She would work in this collaborative way with her sisters, “almost to her death in 1297, in her eighty-seventh year.”⁴⁷

⁴³ Mechthild (of Magdeburg), *The Revelations of Mechthild of Magdeburg (1210-1297)*, 188-89.

⁴⁴ Menzies, ‘The Revelations of Mechthild of Magdeburg (1210-1297)’, xx.

⁴⁵ Menzies, *The Revelations of Mechthild of Magdeburg (1210-1297)*, xx.

⁴⁶ Menzies, *The Revelations of Mechthild of Magdeburg (1210-1297)*, xxi.

⁴⁷ Menzies, *The Revelations of Mechthild of Magdeburg (1210-1297)*, xxi.

There is something so utterly remarkable about Mechthild precisely in what she claims makes her the simplest creature to ever exist in spiritual life. Living outside of both worldly and religious conventions, Mechthild developed a theology and method of understanding Christ supported solely by the love she felt for him and the love she felt herself receive from him. Her visions frequently center around herself, who she always describes as “the soul,” and her interactions with God, with whom she has a loving relationship. She consistently returns to this loving relationship throughout the book, writing, “Lord! Thou art my beloved! My desire! My flowing stream! My Sun! And I am Thy reflection!”⁴⁸ Notably, she also engages with figures who she understands and imagines to be an extension of God, such as “Love,” “Understanding,” “Contemplation,” and, “The Senses.” This deeply compassionate and humanistic way of understanding God characterizes the entirety of Mechthild’s work, always focusing on how those on earth can attempt to be like Christ, or be his reflection, by following his example of withstanding suffering and still experiencing boundless love despite this suffering. Mechthild refused to let any structures inhibit her transmission of God’s messages, writing in prose, poetry, and dialogue form, often all in the same chapter. No matter the style though, Mechthild always returns to the idea of God as her lover and herself as a reflection of God’s love.

c. Mahadeviyakka

Mahadeviyakka, also known as Akka Mahadevi or simply Mahadevi, holds a place of great significance in the history of Hindu mystics and saints. The honorific “akka,” literally meaning older sister, was given to her by the other notable male saints she lived with, such as Basavanna and Allama Prabhu, demonstrating the authoritative yet loving presence she was understood to be.⁴⁹ Considered a preeminent figure in the newly forming Virashaiva sect of the

⁴⁸ Mechthild (of Magdeburg), *The Revelations of Mechthild of Magdeburg (1210-1297)*, 9.

⁴⁹ A. K. Ramanujan, *Speaking of Śiva*, Penguin Little Black Classics 79 (London: Penguin Books, 2015), 144.

twelfth century, Mahadeviyakka was at the forefront of a radical new form of Shaivism which rejected the caste system, traditional temple worship, and emphasized the rights of women. While much of what we know about Mahadeviyakka comes from Indian folk tales, mythology, and hagiography, there are roughly 350 vacanas, or poems, attributed to her which provide incredible insight into not only her perspective, but into the world of medieval Indian women in general. These vacanas are typically relatively short and aphoristic, very different from the sprawling bibliography of Hildegard or the lengthy poetic descriptions found in the work of Mechthild. In general, Mahadeviyakka focuses much more on the immediate world around her, describing her journeys as a wandering saint and the encounters with Shiva she experienced on this journey. It could be said that Mahadeviyakka's poems depict a direct experience of the transformations which Hildegard and Mechthild engaged with more theoretically and artistically. Additionally, Mahadeviyakka reads as distinctly isolated, speaking often of how those on earth, including her family and former husband, can never fully understand her and her love for Shiva, whom she assigns the name Channamallikarjuna, translating as either "Lord, white as jasmine" or "Arjuna, lord of goddess Mallika." This name would become her *ankita*, or signature, which scholars use to identify her poetry.⁵⁰

The Life of Mahadeviyakka

While the life of Mahadeviyakka has been written about extensively, both in the time of and in the centuries since Mahadeviyakka lived, it can be difficult to decipher what is true from what is myth. Some stories are less believable than others, such as the popular legend that, after she abandoned all clothing in pursuit of true asceticism, Shiva protected her by covering her whole body in long hair. Despite these less reliable claims, there are still core details we know of Mahadeviyakka's life which provide key insight into her literary work and philosophy.

⁵⁰ Ramanujan, *Speaking of Śiva*, 111.

In his book *Speaking of Siva*, A.K Ramanujan has organized one of the most comprehensive collections of Virashaiva literature currently available, writing about the lives of its four most major saints, including Mahadeviyakka. For this reason, this work will be heavily referenced in summarizing the life of Mahadeviyakka. In addition to this, Vinaya Chaitanya's book *Songs for Siva: Vacanas of Akka Mahadevi* will be used later for more in-depth analysis of her actual poetry.⁵¹ According to Ramanujan, Mahadeviyakka was born in roughly 1130, "in Udatadi, a village in Sivamogga, near the birthplace of Allama," one of the men who would run the Kalyana center for Virashaiva practitioners which Mahadeviyakka would join.⁵² At ten, she was initiated to the Virashaiva faith by an unknown guru and, from this point on, swore that Shiva would be the only husband she ever took. This decision had both practical and spiritual benefits for a young woman in medieval India who did not want to take part in an arranged marriage.

Despite this, Mahadeviyakka was pursued by a local Jain king named Kausika who asked for her hand in marriage when she was sixteen. Scholars and hagiographical sources differ wildly on the results of this pursuit with some disputing that a marriage between them ever took place, but Ramanujan states, "It is quite likely that she married him and lived with him, though some scholars dispute the tainting fact."⁵³ In her own vacanas Mahadeviyakka recounts aspects of this story, stating, "Husband inside, Lover outside. I can't manage them both."⁵⁴ Some stories claim that she married Kaushika under specific conditions which allowed her to still worship Shiva. This is described by Mukunda Rao in his book *Sky-Clad*, a dedicated biography of Mahadeviyakka, where he describes the three conditions Mahadeviyakka gives her husband:

⁵¹ Vinaya Chaitanya, *Songs for Siva: Vacanas of Akka Mahadevi* (India: Harper Perennial, 2017).

⁵² Ramanujan, *Speaking of Siva*, 111.

⁵³ Ramanujan, *Speaking of Siva*, 111.

⁵⁴ Ramanujan, *Speaking of Siva*, 126.

“You should not come in the way of my devotion to Lord Shiva and my sadhana,” “I should not be prevented from meeting my guru and visiting maheshwaras,” and, most crucially, “I shall live the way I like.”⁵⁵ These conditions demonstrate the radically spiritual way Mahadeviyakka lived her life, not acting according to the social and legal expectations for a woman and wife, but according to the expectations of Shiva who she understood to be her one true partner. Needless to say, the marriage could not have lasted long under these conditions and Ramanujan states, “At one point, Kausika appears to have tried to force his will on her and so she leaves him, cutting clean her relations with the whole world of men.”⁵⁶ Most scholars agree it was at this point that Mahadeviyakka disavowed all personal objects, including her clothing, and began to journey through the world clad only by sky.⁵⁷

According to Ramanujan, from here she “walked towards Kalyana, the center of Virasaiva saints, the ‘halls of experience’ where Allama and Basavanna ran a school for kindred spirits.” It is in this place and with these men that many of Mahadeviyakka’s *vacanas* took form. One wonders how these men would have reacted to this young woman emerging from the forest, entirely naked and self-willed in her practice of Shaivism. According to Chandra Y. Mudaliar in her article “Religious Experiences of Hindu Women: A Study of Akka Mahadevi,” her unique wisdom and insight was made clear to these men very quickly, stating, “the elders realized that Akka Mahadevi, though young, was already much advanced on the spiritual path.”⁵⁸ Her relationship with Allama Prabhu would be particularly fruitful for both poets, as their interactions are recorded in the *Shunya Sampadane*, part of the holy scripture of Virashaivism

⁵⁵ Rao, *Sky-Clad*, 22.

⁵⁶ Ramanujan, *Speaking of Śiva*, 111.

⁵⁷ Rao, *Sky-Clad*, 26-27.

⁵⁸ Chandra Y Mudaliar, ‘Religious Experiences of Hindu Women: A Study of Akka Mahadevi’, *Mystics Quarterly* 17, no. 3 (1991): 141, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20717064>.

which anthologizes thousands of vacanas and records of dialogues between saints, primarily focusing on the life journey of Allama.

Similar to Hildegard's relationship with the monks who transcribed her work, Mahadeviyakka's interactions with these men gave her a baseline authority from which she could expand her own individual experience of God, uninhibited by the limitations of gender. According to Mudaliar, it was Allama who, "advised her 'to first disengage herself from 'I-ness' and 'thouness,' and that she would then see with the eye of knowledge." Perhaps with this advice in mind, Mahadeviyakka would soon depart from the Kalyana school, seeking even more complete devotion to Shiva by living in the forest alone.

According to Ramanujan, it was during this time she "wandered off again towards Srisaila, the holy mountain, where she found him [Shiva] and lost herself."⁵⁹ Mahadeviyakka's choice to live in the mountains naked and entirely alone, although not unheard of, was extremely rare for female practitioners. While the Bhakti movement did lead to more female seers and mystics than previously, according to Mudaliar, "most of these women seers were pressured to lead a normal married life or, at best, find salvation within the matrix of marriage."⁶⁰ Female nudity, in particular, was deeply controversial across Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism. The issue caused a schism in Jainism, with the Yapaniya sect deciding that nudity was not necessary for complete renunciation, while the Digambara sect insisted that nudity was necessary and women could not take part in this as, "women could never be free from the powerful emotions of shame and fear arising from their naked bodies."⁶¹ As such, one is left wondering why Mahadeviyakka would leave a community of men and women which accepted her radical form of devotion for a world of complete isolation, rife with danger and potential for attacks. This may

⁵⁹ Ramanujan, *Speaking of Śiva*, 113.

⁶⁰ Mudaliar, 'Religious Experiences of Hindu Women', 138.

⁶¹ Rao, *Sky-Clad*, 32.

be due to limitations she found at Kalyana, discussed in more detail later, as well as her ultimate desire for union with Shiva which is completely unmediated and dissolves all other binaries.

In the face of a society and culture which deeply questioned the authenticity of women's spirituality, it is Mahadeviyakka's total faith in Shiva's love for her and her unshakeable belief that worldly things are corrupt which seems to have assured her that she was on the right path, demonstrated by one of her vacanas which begins, "Why do I need this dummy of a dying world?" and concludes, "Take me, flaws and all, O lord."⁶² By placing her faith in a God which she sees as inextricably bound to her, Mahadeviyakka could feel safe in her experience of Shiva, as the nondual nature of Virashaivism tells her that Shiva can be found in every aspect of life, including herself, no matter how flawed she may perceive herself to be. Mahadeviyakka would spend the rest of her years living in this way where, "it is said she would be found roaming and singing near caves and streams in the forest."⁶³ Legend claims that she achieved true nirvana in her final moments in the mountains of Srisailam where she "died 'in oneness with Siva'"⁶⁴ She could not have been older than thirty years old.

The mythos surrounding Mahadeviyakka has made her both a legendary and mysterious figure in the world of Hindu mystics. Her vacanas consistently reckon with the nature of non-duality, the experiences of the body in relation to nature, and the extreme ecstasy and agony she experiences as a result of her relationship with Shiva. Through the extreme circumstances of her life, she places complete faith in Shiva, writing in one vacana translated by Ramanujan, "O lord white as jasmine/ if my head falls from my shoulders /I shall think it your offering."⁶⁵ This sense of complete resignation to the will of Shiva reflects the highly developed spiritual attitude

⁶² Ramanujan, *Speaking of Śiva*, 133.

⁶³ Mudaliar, 'Religious Experiences of Hindu Women', 141

⁶⁴ Ramanujan, *Speaking of Śiva*, 113.

⁶⁵ Ramanujan, *Speaking of Śiva*, 119.

which earned her the respect of her male counterparts and her legacy as one of the greatest Bhakti poet-saints many centuries after her death. Despite her relatively small bibliography, Mahadeviyakka has been widely beloved throughout the centuries for her intensely passionate and vulnerable devotional poetry. While many men had taken on female perspectives and imagined coupling with Shiva in their own *vacanas*, the deeply bodily and transformative way Mahadeviyakka understands this union makes her distinct from her male contemporaries. Seeking a complete union with Shiva, described both as her true husband and illicit lover, Mahadeviyakka's *vacanas* suggest a complete abandonment and transcendence of the individual form which can only be achieved through fully embodied devotion and love.

d. Laleshwari

The medieval Kashmir poet known most colloquially as Lalla has, over the course of several centuries, come to be known by two other titles with two very different meanings. In Kashmir, she was given the title *Lal Ded*, translating to Grandmother Lal in Kashmiri. In Sanskrit, she is called Laleshwari or Lallesvari, translating roughly to, "Lalla, the great yogini," according to Coleman Barks in his book *Naked Song*.⁶⁶ The seemingly dual nature demonstrated in Lalla's two names exemplifies the nondual way she understood Shiva, the lord to whom she spent her life devoted, and the cosmic world as a whole. On one hand, she is a legendary figure in Kashmiri writing specifically due to her "grandmotherly" nature, writing with a warmth and pithy quality that stays in one's memory and allows for readily quotable lines. On the other hand, her visions and theology surrounding Shiva suggest a much more forceful yogic perspective and include images more visceral or explicit in nature than one might expect from a grandmother. Lalla's writing displays both of these perspectives, often at the same time. Understanding how she could embody both of these roles at once bears similarities to how Lalla understood Shiva.

⁶⁶ Laldyada, *Naked Song*, trans. Coleman Barks (Athens, GA: Maypop, 1992), 9.

As Shiva is found in everything, any contradictions that emerge from this only further reflect the all-encompassing and nondual nature of Shiva which Lalla expresses through the non-dualistic attitude of her writing.

The *Lalla-Vakyani*, literally meaning Lalla's Word, is still a widely quoted and beloved text for Kashmir people, both Hindu and non-Hindu alike. Her poems, called *vakhs*, are some of the earliest records of writing in the Kashmiri language.⁶⁷ They document a period of great cultural change and exchange, as Lalla's lifespan (roughly 1301 to 1373) encompassed both the expansion of Kashmiri Shaivism, as well as the first Muslim ruler of Kashmir.⁶⁸ As such, her writing reflects a more universal kind of mysticism which finds Shiva in everything and everything in Shiva, thus extending to figures and religions outside of Hinduism as well, including Sufism, Islam, Tantric, Yogachara and Theravada Buddhism. Kashmir Shaivism was already oriented more toward the mystical experience, with Ranjit Hoskote describing the beliefs of typical Kashmir Shaivism, writing, "Kashmir Śaivism recommends the transmutation of all outward observances into visualizations and experiments in consciousness, so that the idol is replaced by the mental image and the sacrifice of an animal by the deliberate extinction of the lower appetites."⁶⁹ Similar to the Virashaiva sect of Mahadeviyakka, Kashmir Shaivism was more concerned with the internal experience, rather than ritual practice. Making Kashmir Shaivism distinct from the Karnataka Virashaivas is their engagement with various other philosophical traditions, making them far less sectarian and more open to the influence of traditions outside of Shaivism.

⁶⁷ Chandra Kumari Handoo, 'Lalleswari or Lal Diddi of Kashmir', in *Women Saints East and West*, ed. Swami Ghanananda and John Stewart-Wallace (Hollywood, California: Vedanta Press, 1979), 42.

⁶⁸ Ranjit Hoskote and Laldyada, *I, Lalla: The Poems of Lal Dēd* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2013), 20.

⁶⁹ Ranjit Hoskote and Laldyada, *I, Lalla: The Poems of Lal Dēd* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2013), 17.

The word *vakh*, translated either as verse or utterance, as well as her use of the common language of her people, indicates the immediacy of Lalla's writings, as they were intended to document a direct and succinct outpouring of her soul, rather than an intentional poetic composition. While the legendary status surrounding Lalla, as well as differences amongst the various groups which claim her, does complicate our understanding of her life, looking at multiple translations of her vakhs gives us more direct insight into the woman who strived to dissolve all boundaries between herself and Shiva and, by extension, between herself and the cosmic universe as a whole.

The first compiled English translation of Lalla's vakhs was published in 1920 by Sir George Grierson with notes from Lionel D. Barnett.⁷⁰ Grierson was a scholar and civil servant who served as England's first Superintendent of the Linguistic Survey of India. In this role, he sought to find a reliable copy of the Lalla-vakyani which he could translate from Kashmiri to English. Upon finding no such copy, Grierson referred to a colleague, Pandit Mukunda Rama Sastri, who referred him to Pandit Dharma-dasa Darwesh, an elderly storyteller in the village of Gush whose family had passed down memorization of the Lalla-vakyani over several generations.⁷¹ Darwesh recited the vakhs, Sastri wrote them down, and, finally, Grierson translated them. Grierson describes his purpose in translating the Lalla-vakyani in the preface to his book "Lalla Vakyani or The Wise Sayings of Lal Ded," stating, "The book, in short, gives an account, often in vivid and picturesque language, of the actual working out in practice of a religion previously worked out in theory. As such, it is a unique contribution to a body of evidence that must necessarily form the basis of a future history of one of the most important

⁷⁰ Laldyada and Sir George Grierson, *Lalla-Vakyani or the Wise Sayings of Lal-Ded - A Mystic Poetess of Ancient Kashmir* (London: The Royal Asiatic Society, 1920), <https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.174725>.

⁷¹ Sir George Grierson, 'Introduction', in *Lalla-Vakyani or the Wise Sayings of Lal-Ded - A Mystic Poetess of Ancient Kashmir*, by Laldyada (London: The Royal Asiatic Society, 1920), 5-6, <https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.174725>

religious systems in India.”⁷² With this goal in mind, Grierson’s translation clearly emphasizes the Hindu beliefs and practices Lalla is referencing in her writing. This may be, at times, at the detriment of the translation, as while Grierson’s elaborate translation would certainly have been helpful for an audience not familiar with Hinduism or Kashmir, some vakhks seem to be overly detailed in their translation, often including explanations or descriptions of larger concepts which Lalla only mentions in passing. Additionally, the English language has evolved a great deal since 1920, rendering much of Grierson’s translation difficult to decipher for a modern audience.

With this in mind, I will also be looking at the translation by Ranjit Hoskote in his book “I, Lalla.”⁷³ Published in 2011 after over twenty years of research by Hoskote, the translation takes on a much more modern perspective, highlighting the non-sectarian aspects of Lalla’s writings as well as her unique status as a Kashmiri woman who wandered alone, in contrast with Bhakti saint-poets who lived in communities. For the purposes of this project, I will only be looking at vakhks which have been translated by both Grierson and Hoskote in order for two-fold analysis of the vakhk’s meaning to be possible. While Grierson’s translation provides insight into the history and the most literal interpretation of Lalla’s writings, Hoskote gives us a more modern and poetic perspective which attempts to hold onto the structure and imagery of Lalla’s original work. Looked at together, a more complex image of Lalla emerges, painting her both as a product of the rich traditions and practices which came before her, as well as a completely new kind of poet and saint, not concerned with sect or guru, but with her own individual journey.

Additional translations by Coleman Barks⁷⁴ and Jaishree Kak Odin⁷⁵ will be occasionally used

⁷² Sir George Grierson, ‘Preface’, in *Lalla-Vakyani or the Wise Sayings of Lal-Ded - A Mystic Poetess of Ancient Kashmir*, by Laldyada (London: The Royal Asiatic Society, 1920), vi, <https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.174725>.

⁷³ Ranjit Hoskote and Laldyada, *I, Lalla: The Poems of Lal Dēd* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2013).

⁷⁴ Laldyada, *Naked Song*.

⁷⁵ Laldyada and Jaishree Kak Odin, *Mystical Verses of Lallā: A Journey of Self Realization*, 1st ed (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 2007).

for further insight, as the Kashmiri language is extremely complex and allows for multiple interpretations of the same words.

In her writing, Lalla deals with the divine directly and often places herself directly in or around this divine. Her signature line or ankita– “Lal boh,” or “I, Lalla”– exemplifies this. Although only appearing in sixteen of her vakhs, this inclusion of the first person as well as her name demonstrates the deeply personal relationship Lalla understood herself to have with Shiva which allowed her to speak with such vivid and direct language. For this reason, I will be referring to her as Lalla, the name she chose to go by in her own writing, going forward.

The Life of Lalla

Of the four mystics being examined in this project, the least is known about the real life of Lalla. As most of her life’s story and writings were passed down orally, these stories have become more legend than history. Even core details of Lalla’s life are still uncertain. According to Hoskote, “Modern scholars have suggested that she was born in 1301 or between 1317 and 1320, either in Sempore near Pampore, or in Pandrenthan near Srinagar. She is believed to have died in 1373, although no one is certain where.”⁷⁶ The first mention of Lalla in writing only comes in 1587 in the *Tadhkirat ul-Arifin*, a hagiography of saints in Kashmir written by Mulla Ali Raina. A more comprehensive account of the life of Lalla would come over a century later in Khwaja Azam Diddamari’s *Tarikh-i azami* or *Waqi’at-i Kashmir* (1736). These hagiographical accounts, along with the details of her life mentioned in Lalla’s own vakhs, would come to form the popular legends surrounding Lal Ded in Kashmir.

Lalla is believed to have been born into a Brahmin family and was thus married off at age twelve according to the local custom.⁷⁷ There are many popular legends surrounding the cruelty

⁷⁶ Hoskote and Laldyada, *I, Lalla*, 14.

⁷⁷ Handoo, ‘Lalleswari or Lal Diddi of Kashmir’, 43.

Lalla faced in this marriage, particularly at the hands of her mother in law who disagreed with Lalla's intense devotional practice. The most well known of these stories is the legend that, for all of Lalla's meals, her mother in law would cover a large stone with a thin layer of rice, making it seem as if she was given a large portion when she actually was not. Despite this, Lalla never spoke out. From this story comes the popular Kashmir saying, referenced in both Grierson and Hoskote, "Whether they kill a ram or a sheep, Lalla will get a stone to eat."^{78 79} The widespread popularity of legends surrounding the cruel mother-in-law suggests the resonance that Lalla's story might have had with women or girls who faced similar circumstances in arranged marriages. Given it was the oral tradition that kept Lalla's story alive, this resonance with women may explain the centrality of the mother-in-law in these legends, as more women may have added details over the centuries to fill in this well-known picture of a misunderstood young woman stifled by her husband's family.

According to Hoskote, Lalla renounced this home, family, and all personal belongings, including clothing, in pursuit of spiritual life. From here she became the disciple of Saiva saint Sed Boyu, or Siddha Srikantha, where she first gained insight into the spiritual path. In her paper, "Lalleswari or Lal Diddi of Kashmir," Chandra Kumari Handoo writes, "Lalla is said to have excelled her guru and often to have beaten him in retort and argument; but the result of his teaching was that she became a Saiva yogini (mendicant devotee) and... wandered about the country in a semi-nude condition."⁸⁰ It is at this point in her life that most of her vakhs are believed to have been uttered. Her vakhs often surround the torment and insults she receives as a result of her wandering, frequently describing cruel encounters with passersby and how the presence of Shiva in her life allowed these encounters to have no effect on her. While forest

⁷⁸ Hoskote and Laldyada, *I, Lalla*, 15.

⁷⁹ Grierson, 'Introduction', 2.

⁸⁰ Handoo, 'Lalleswari or Lal Diddi of Kashmir', 44.

dwelling ascetics were not uncommon for the time in Kashmir, Lalla's male predecessors in Kashmir Shaivism had not been renunciants, instead choosing to live within society as teachers, scholars, and writers.⁸¹ However, as a woman, Lalla could not live in society while still practicing spiritual life, as these roles of scholar or teacher would not have been made available to her. With this in mind, Lalla's path appears distinctly unique and more isolated than any of the female mystics examined thus far.

This isolated perspective is very clear in Lalla's writing, as she holds such little regard for the material world or any of the people in it, seeing herself and Shiva as the only "real" things in this world in which all things are truly Shiva. Many of her vakhs deal with this apathy toward the world of other people who don't understand her practice, with one vakh translated by Hoskote reading, "They lash me with insults, serenade me with curses/ Their barking means nothing to me./Even if they came with soul-flowers to offer,/ I couldn't care less. Untouched, I move on."⁸² In general, Lalla comes across far more self-assured, even arrogant, in her vakhs which are based entirely on her experience of Shiva which she understands as superior to the practices of any community or sect. Both in her understanding of Shiva worship and the way she lived her life, Lalla spent the majority of her life as one who walked alone.

While there is no reliable information surrounding the nature of Lalla's death, one gets a clear sense of spiritual development over the course of her vakhs, as she goes from one desperately seeking relief from this world through union with Shiva to one who has been relieved by being inextricably merged within Shiva. One vakh demonstrating this state of mind reads:

As the moonlight faded, I called out to the madwoman,
eased her pain with the Love of God

⁸¹ Hoskote and Laldyada, *I, Lalla*, 16.

⁸² Hoskote and Laldyada, *I, Lalla*, 155.

‘It’s Lalla, it’s Lalla,’ I cried, waking up the loved one
I mixed with him and drowned in a crystal lake.⁸³

In this vakh, Lalla seamlessly switches between the perspective of herself and Shiva, writing both as the one who “eased her pain with the Love of God,” and as the one crying out, “It’s Lalla, it’s Lalla.” Reconciling both of these identities is her assertion that she “mixed with him and drowned in a crystal lake.” Grounded in the natural world surrounding her, as well as her understanding of union with Shiva as cultivating the aspects of Shiva which already reside within her, Lalla writes of her experience of God in extremely visceral and exclusive terms which venerate her own encounters with Shiva as the most absolute and true form of devotion.

⁸³ Hoskote and Laldyada, *I, Lalla*, 111.

Chapter 2: Situating the Mystics

a. The Water Mixing Dilemma

Turning towards comparative analysis of these women, one's first instinct may be to find common images which emerge in their writing that might be interpreted as unifying their disparate worlds. One does not have to look far to find such an image. The image of water mixing with another substance appears across all four mystics work, perhaps suggesting that this image would be core to medieval female mysticism across cultures. However, closer analysis indicates that this image actually falls under what Caroline Walker Bynum described as "look-a-likes" in her paper "Avoiding the Tyranny of Morphology."⁸⁴ As Bynum concludes, "Morphology or similitude—that is, "looking like"—may not be the best basis for a comparative study that must, in the final analysis, consider both similarity and difference to be problematic if it is to illuminate either side of a comparison."⁸⁵ While the similar image of water mixing does, in fact, look quite alike in all four of these mystics writings, their meanings are very different. By examining how these mystics use this one image for their own distinct purposes, one sees how very different these women are from one another.

First looking at Hildegard, the image of water mixing comes up in the twelfth vision of the third book of *Scivias*, in which she describes a vision she received of Judgment Day and the new world to come. She writes, "For the fire displaces all the air, and the water engulfs all the earth; and thus all things are purified, and whatever was foul in the world vanishes as if it had never been, as salt disappears when it is put into water." (3.12§2).⁸⁶ The surrounding context for

⁸⁴ Caroline W. Bynum, 'Avoiding the Tyranny of Morphology; or, Why Compare?', *History of Religions* 53, no. 4 (May 2014): 341-68, doi:10.1086/675366.

⁸⁵ Bynum, 'Avoiding the Tyranny of Morphology; or, Why Compare?', 346.

⁸⁶ Hildegard, *Scivias*, 516. Going forward, parenthetical in-line citations will be used when referencing Hildegard to reflect the book, vision, and section being cited. In this instance, (3.12§2) indicates that this quote is from section two of the twelfth vision of the third book of *Scivias*.

the water mixing image in this instance is deeply apocalyptic and cosmic, demonstrated by the engulfing of *all* the earth and the purifying of *all* things. As such, the water mixing image becomes a vision of the world after revelation. Salt acts as a symbol for all that is foul in the world while water is the purity of a world consumed totally by God. Notably, the salt “vanishes as if it had never been,” rather than mixing or being infused with the water.

In Mechthild’s writing, water mixes with a different substance, in this instance, wine. This image comes up in the first part of *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, when she describes a vision of herself, “the poor soul,” going to court and witnessing God who proudly declares his love for Mechthild who is “discreet and modest.” Mechthild describes how, “God lays the soul in his glowing heart so that He, the great God, and she, the humble maid, embrace and are one as water with wine.”⁸⁷ Immediately upon reading one gets a sense of the disparity between water mixing imagery in Hildegard’s writing and Mechthild’s use of the symbol. By mixing water with wine, rather than salt, this image becomes a symbol specifically of the intoxicating powers of Christ. Wine, as the symbol of Christ’s blood in the eucharist, takes on a particularly charged meaning, reflecting a deep sense of embodiment in both the humble maid and Christ himself. Wine acts as both a symbol of the literal body of Christ, due to its role in the eucharist, and a symbol of spiritual intoxication, a commonly found theme in both the Old and New Testament. If the humble maid, Mechthild, is understood to be the water, mixing with the wine allows her to embrace and be one with Christ. This is strikingly different from Hildegard who imagines union with Christ on a cosmic, universal level, rather than an interpersonal one. Mechthild’s personal relationship with Christ is further highlighted in this chapter, as the lines following the above quote reflect the sexual imagery through which Mechthild often understood and envisioned God. Additionally, Mechthild describes the maiden after mixing with God as, “overcome and beside

⁸⁷ Mechthild (of Magdeburg), *The Revelations of Mechthild of Magdeburg (1210-1297)*, 9.

herself for weakness and can no more.” This understanding of the soul after mixing with God differs radically from the Hindu interpretation of the same idea.

In sharp contrast to both Hildegard and Mechthild, Mahadeviyakka describes the mixture of milk and water in one of her vacanas beginning, “You are like milk.” The first few lines of the vacana read, “You’re like milk in water. I cannot tell what comes before, what after; which is the master, which the slave.”⁸⁸ Rather than imagining the world to come or a romantic court scene, Mahadeviyakka uses the image of water mixing to depict her current mental state. As she is constantly working towards a more fully embodied union with Shiva, unlike in Christianity where union with God is understood to come after death, this vacana depicts a mind in the midst of active enlightenment. The water acts as a symbol for her mind before Shiva and the milk as a symbol of Shiva’s transformative powers. Once she has been permeated by this “milk” of Shiva, she can no longer see the world around her in the same way. She can now see past worldly divisions such as time and caste, ending the vacana by asking, “if an ant should love you and praise you, will he not grow to demon powers?” This further demonstrates Mahadeviyakka’s understanding of milk mixing with water as a symbol of Shiva bestowing knowledge and power upon his subject by “mixing” with them. Again, this demonstrates a fundamental difference between Mahadeviyakka and Mechthild, who understands mixing with God not as a process which empowers her, but as a process which overcomes and weakens her, although this is not explicitly negative in Mechthild’s theological understanding.

Finally, Lalla describes salt and water mixing in a vahk which Hoskote translates as:

You won’t find the Truth
by crossing your legs and holding your breath.
Daydreams won’t take you through the gateway of release.
You can stir as much salt as you like in water,

⁸⁸ Ramanujan, *Speaking of Śiva*, 115.

it won't become the sea.⁸⁹

The closing line of the *vahk*, “You can stir as much salt as you like in water,/ it won't become the sea,” demonstrates a radically different understanding of water mixing imagery than any of the ones examined thus far. Rather than describing any kind of unification with God, Lalla uses this image specifically to point out the flaws in this kind of understanding of unification. As analyzed more fully above, Lalla, coming from the more monistic world of Kashmir Shaivism, does not believe anything must be added or “mixed in” to oneself in order for one to be unified with Shiva. As the surrounding context of Lalla's other *vahks* demonstrates, she believes all people have Shiva residing within them and they can experience union with him simply by searching within themselves, as well as rejecting the material world. Thus, in this instance, water mixing takes on a negative connotation, acting as a symbol of poor meditative practice which believes man must obtain something they don't already possess in order to reach enlightenment.

Clearly, based on these radically different interpretations of the same image, one is not going to find the key to medieval women's mysticism in the content, imagery, or stylistic characteristics of these women's writings. Instead of asking *what* it is these women have in common, a better question at this time may be *why* it is that all of these women were able to write mysticism with such conviction during a time when women were given virtually no other creative freedoms. By answering this question, one gets a better sense of what these women really share, across both cultures and centuries. While there are many morphological similarities between these female mystics by the very nature of them all being female and mystics, the above analysis demonstrates how this method of comparison is not productive or interesting. In the conclusion to her article, Bynum argues, “for making explicit the grounds—formal, functional,

⁸⁹ Hoskote and Laldyada, *I, Lalla*, 108.

structural, psychological, cognitive, or devotional—of any comparison drawn.”⁹⁰ As such, I suggest that comparing the intersection of the functional and devotional in the written works of these women provides tremendous insight into how they were able to claim spiritual autonomy and produce original ideas and language at a time when very few women could. Rather than a common set of symbols or motifs, the writing of these women is unified by the strategies they deploy and archetypes they invoke in their language which gave them the authority to write about God.

b. Lacan, Kristeva, and the Semiotic

Besides the fact that all four of the women being examined in this project are female and mystics, the unifying trait which makes them most distinct from their peers across continents and centuries— and what has prevented history from forgetting them— is that all of these women were writers. While the particulars of the transcribing and editing process differed for all of these women, they each chose language, specifically poetic language, as their means of communication with God and their surrounding religious community. Given this fact, looking towards linguistics and philosophy allows us to better understand the process with which these women constructed language and their conception of the self in relation to God.

Over the course of his now famous seminars, held yearly from 1953 to 1981, Jacques Lacan established one of the most well known structures of psychoanalytic functioning with his Three Orders. The Three Orders— the imaginary, the symbolic, and the real— each describe an aspect of mental functioning and processing which informs how a person constructs their identity and communicates in the world.⁹¹ The imaginary order is the first psychic process any human being experiences, being associated with the mother, early childhood, and the natural world. The

⁹⁰ Bynum, ‘Avoiding the Tyranny of Morphology; or, Why Compare?’, 346.

⁹¹ Dylan Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (London ; New York: Routledge, 1996), 84.

imaginary order is understood to begin at roughly six months once the child has entered the “mirror stage,” the stage in which a child recognizes themselves in the mirror and begins to understand their relationship to the body.⁹² In *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, Dylan Evans describes the imaginary, stating, “The imaginary is thus rooted in the subject’s relationship to his own body (or rather to the image of his body).”⁹³ In general, the imaginary deals with that which is pre-linguistic and pre-symbolic.

In sharp contrast, the symbolic order consists of all communication and methods of exchanging words. Once one has come out of early childhood and begins communicating, they are understood to be “entering” the symbolic world. This is not a gradual process but, rather, a realization of a “universe of symbols” which has seemingly always existed and which a subject is commanded into entering by the pre-established order of language.⁹⁴ This command comes from the Name of the Father, another theory of Lacan’s. In this theory, the father in the symbolic order acts as an agent of language, introducing and bringing the child into the world of law, language, and society. By extension, the symbolic order is understood to be ruled or associated with the symbolic phallus. By separating the child from the imaginary unified world of child and mother, the symbolic father brings them into the wider world of the individual and culture. This is the defining difference between the imaginary and the symbolic, as Evans writes, “What distinguishes the symbolic order of culture from the imaginary order of nature is the inscription of a line of male descentence.”⁹⁵

The final order, the Real, can be understood as the impossible, unchangeable, or fixed parts of the universe which lie at the core of each individual. Evans describes how it is distinct

⁹² Jane Gallop, ‘Lacan’s “Mirror Stage”: Where to Begin’, *SubStance* 11/12 (1982): 118–28, doi:10.2307/3684185.

⁹³ Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, 84.

⁹⁴ Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, 191.

⁹⁵ Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, 63.

from both the imaginary and symbolic, defining the real as, “that which is outside language and inassimilable to symbolisation.”⁹⁶ As the Real order only exists in theory, it is not as pertinent to our discussion of identity formation and the communication of ideas through linguistics.

Arriving in Lacan’s Paris at the age of 24, Julia Kristeva developed her own linguistic and philosophical approach to analyzing poetic language by modifying the Three Orders, particularly looking at the Imaginary and Symbolic orders. While her understanding of the symbolic bears much in common with Lacan, she breaks off from his understanding of the Imaginary as a stage which must be largely abandoned in order to enter the Symbolic order, reimagining it as what she calls the “semiotic.” This is unrelated to the linguistic field of semiotic studies and any reference made to “the semiotic” going forward can be understood as referring specifically to Kristeva’s conception of the semiotic. Described by Katherine J. Goodnow in her book *Kristeva in Focus* as, “fluid, suffused with feeling, and attuned to the physical,”⁹⁷ the semiotic deeply informs the writing of female mystics, particularly in the middle ages, and unifies them across differences in belief and content. This is articulated further by Susan Hekman in her article, “Reconstituting the Subject: Feminism, Modernism, and Postmodernism,” where she defines the semiotic as, “concerned with specifying the signifying process such as art, poetry, and myth that are irreducible to the language object.”⁹⁸ In the work of the female mystics examined in this project, art, poetry, and myth all come together in a way which is deeply informed by and imbued with the semiotic.

⁹⁶ Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, 163.

⁹⁷ Katherine J. Goodnow, *Kristeva in Focus: From Theory to Film Analysis*, First paperback edition (New York: Berghahn Books, 2014), 30.

⁹⁸ Susan Hekman, ‘Reconstituting the Subject: Feminism, Modernism, and Postmodernism’, *Hypatia* 6, no. 2 (1991): 55, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3810095>.

In her essay “Revolution in Poetic Language,”⁹⁹ Kristeva approaches the development of avant-garde or modernist literature, what she calls a revolution in language, which she understands to be analogous with a political revolution. Responding to the developments of literature seen in the work of writers such as Stéphane Mallarmé, James Joyce, and Antonin Artaud, Kristeva suggests that we need a new framework to understand the role of the subject in relation to language. Similar to modernist literature, the writings of medieval mystics challenge all preexisting notions of straightforward symbolism and narrative. Thus, Kristeva’s meditations on the modernist revolution in language can be carried over to the mystical revolution in language which took place in the middle ages.

Beginning first with the semiotic, Kristeva first introduces the concept of the “semiotic chora.” Kristeva defines the semiotic chora herself in “Revolution in Poetic Language,” stating, “the semiotic chora is no more than the place where the subject is both generated and negated, the place where his unity succumbs before the process of charges and stases that produce him.”¹⁰⁰ In other words, the semiotic chora can be understood as a space and time which is pre-symbol, pre-genital, and pre-separation. A child is understood to exist within the semiotic chora from the time they are born up to when they begin to speak. Unsurprisingly, the semiotic chora is associated with, and symbolically understood to be, the body of the mother. Similar to how the pregnant mother’s body encompasses a sense of unification while still constantly changing and developing, the semiotic chora acts as a space in which the child is developing and changing, but before they have any positionality (position as meaning both a position in their community and as a perspective on a situation). While the semiotic chora only exists in early childhood, the semiotic still influences and informs how an individual communicates and behaves socially.

⁹⁹ Julia Kristeva, ‘Revolution in Poetic Language’, in *The Portable Kristeva*, ed. Kelly Oliver, European Perspectives (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).

¹⁰⁰ Kristeva, ‘Revolution in Poetic Language’, 37.

Kristeva writes, “The mother’s body is therefore what mediates the symbolic law organizing social relations and becomes the ordering principle of the semiotic chora”¹⁰¹ The semiotic is then, by extension, associated with women in general as they have historically not been linked to the symbolic world of culture and language production and are perceived as more closely tied to the physical and instinctual world.

This idea has been explored more fully in an article by Sherry B. Ortner titled, “Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?” in which she writes, “culture (still equated more or less unambiguously with men) recognizes that woman is an active participant in its special processes, but sees her as being, at the same time, more rooted in, or having more direct connection with, nature.”¹⁰² This assertion, whether true or false, has always been used by patriarchal structures for “the pan-cultural devaluation of women.”¹⁰³ As such, women’s association with the semiotic can also be understood as related to their association with the natural world, with both being understood as lesser than the world of culture and focused on the instinctual processes which have not been filtered through socialization and language.

Distinguishing her from Lacan, Kristeva does not imagine the semiotic as being completely abandoned for the symbolic, but, rather, it is negotiated through one’s transition into the symbolic world. Kristeva describes the transition into the symbolic world as a “thetic phase.” She defines thetic stating, “All enunciation, whether of a word or of a sentence, is thetic. It requires an identification; in other words, the subject must separate from and through his image, from and through his objects.”¹⁰⁴ While the thetic phase indicates a subject’s entrance into the symbolic world, it does not mean a complete abandonment of the semiotic. To reject the semiotic

¹⁰¹ Kristeva, ‘Revolution in Poetic Language’, 37.

¹⁰² Sherry B. Ortner, ‘Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?’, *Feminist Studies* 1, no. 2 (1972): 5, doi:10.2307/3177638.

¹⁰³ Sherry B. Ortner, ‘Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?’, 11.

¹⁰⁴ Kristeva, ‘Revolution in Poetic Language’, 40.

completely and only live in the symbolic world would, “face the individual with a world of unrelieved logic, control, system, and technocracy,” a world which clearly does not align with the one we live in.¹⁰⁵ Kristeva describes the thetic phase as a “threshold” between the semiotic and symbolic which, once passed, inextricably connects the two in a way which is negotiated every time one communicates. By imagining both the symbolic (grammatical, cultural, referential) and the semiotic (rhythmic, tonal, instinctual) as constantly being negotiated through communication, she concludes that each individual is a “speaking body,” suggesting the potential for the instinctual drives of the body to manifest themselves in language.^{106 107}

Returning to Kristeva’s original point, it is this constant negotiation between the semiotic and symbolic in writing which has produced a revolution in poetic language. Kristeva states that across all language and literature, “what remodels the symbolic order is always the influx of the semiotic.”¹⁰⁸ The symbolic order can be understood as in line with the patriarchal and hierarchical orders which structure society, given its associations with the father, law, and the social world. In her article, “Julia Kristeva on Femininity,” Ann Rosalind Jones states that, “The Symbolic order is a man’s world,” and concludes that, “In Kristeva’s scheme, the social is always oppressive.”¹⁰⁹ The semiotic can then be understood as a rejection of this masculine and oppressive world, demonstrating how an influx of this semiotic into the symbolic would result in a remodeling of the symbolic order itself. The religious structures of Christianity and Hinduism during the central medieval period could certainly be described as fitting into this order and, as such, the emergence of women writing within these religious structures acts as an influx of the

¹⁰⁵ Goodnow, *Kristeva in Focus: From Theory to Film Analysis*, 30.

¹⁰⁶ Kelly Oliver, ‘Introduction’, in *The Portable Kristeva*, by Julia Kristeva, European Perspectives (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), xxv.

¹⁰⁷ ‘Julia Kristeva | French Author | Britannica’, accessed 29 April 2023, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Julia-Kristeva>.

¹⁰⁸ Kristeva, ‘Revolution in Poetic Language’, 50.

¹⁰⁹ Ann Rosalind Jones, ‘Julia Kristeva on Femininity: The Limits of a Semiotic Politics’, *Feminist Review*, no. 18 (1984): 58, doi:10.2307/1394859.

semiotic into the symbolic order. By entering the symbolic order, these women were able to circumvent traditional expectations of women and remodel the way in which women's experiences of religion were understood. However, the fact that they are women who produced mystical, often perplexing, writing demonstrates that they were not following the rules of the order which they were entering into, instead using the semiotic to shape the way in which they understood God and articulate this understanding to their audience.

The main unifying trait of the four mystics I am examining is the way they insert themselves into the symbolic order of religion while using the language of the semiotic. As these women could not claim authority or agency in their religion through extensive study or leading others, they base it in their lived experiences, operating as a “speaking body,” as Kristeva puts it. They support their lived experiences by invoking patriarchal notions and archetypes of women and femininity such as the female body’s association with the earth and fertility, demonstrating how the semiotic chora arises in their language. While on one hand these associations seem to further the subordination of women within the symbolic order, these women actually subvert these ideas, finding power and beauty in the body’s connection to the earth which their male contemporaries could not invoke in the same way. Additionally, the choices they made in their own lives to remain unmarried and live as independent creative artists and poets emphasizes how any patriarchal ideas which come across in their writing are coming from a place of necessity and negotiation with their already deeply subversive and radical role within a patriarchal society.

Additionally, these women’s writing allows them to enter into the world of ritual which they would not be privy to as women by reimagining rituals as internal processes. Tapping into the instinctual and bodily world of the semiotic, all four mystics find alternative ways of accessing ritual within the experiences of their own bodies. While Hildegard and Mechthild do

this through visions which grant them divine permission to take part in such things, Mahadeviyakka and Lalla reject ritual entirely, granting themselves an individual authority to speak on God based on the all-consuming nature of their union with Shiva which transcends ritual entirely. It is this internalization of ritual which allows them to overcome the most universal ritual which women were not given access to: the ritual initiation of one as a priest or guru. Through their intuitive relationship with God, these women were able to claim the authority to be a spiritual teacher in a different way than men, either by finding alternate forms of preaching, as in the case of Hildegard, or becoming one's own guru, as in the case of Lalla.

Finally, the semiotic can be seen in these women's writings in the ways in which they all claim some degree of inexplicability to their union with God which cannot be fully articulated through language, as well as a sense of madness stemming from this union with God. For Hildegard and Mechthild this manifests itself in an emphasis on their unlearnedness and simple nature, making their relationship with God even more remarkable and driving them mad whenever they are apart from God. Mahadeviyakka and Lalla, on the other hand, emphasize their love-madness for Shiva which makes them unfit for any form of life other than the wandering poet-saint one which they both chose. In all four cases, these women declare that their writing comes from a place beyond language and reasonable logic making their claim to God and religious experience undeniable and inescapable.

In the following chapter, I examine all three of these manifestations of the semiotic— the body as deeply connected to the earth, the internalization of ritual, and the veneration of madness— in each of these four women's writings. Looking at the different ways in which these women wield these ideas demonstrates how, while differing in terms of belief and practice, these women are unified in the way they found an authority to produce creative language surrounding

God by highlighting the very qualities which the patriarchal symbolic order has used to devalue women and their experiences of God across cultures and centuries.

Chapter Three

Part One: Body as Earth

a. Hildegard and Mechthild

The Christian understanding of the themes being examined in this chapter are clearly very different from the Hindu understanding. For this reason, I will be analyzing each theme, beginning with the body as deeply connected to the earth, in separate sections for the Christian and Hindu mystics, beginning with Hildegard.

Born right before the turn of the twelfth century, Hildegard reflects the oldest perspective of the four mystics being examined. As such, Hildegard operates much more firmly within the religious system she is participating in. Additionally, the fact that she was brought up in the church and enclosed from the time she was eight years old is reflected in her writing which has a much more traditional prophetic style and supports many conservative, often misogynistic, perspectives from within the Church. However, closer analysis of Hildegard's treatment of these ideas, along with the context of the deeply independent and creative way she lived her life, suggests that she was intentionally subverting and raising questions about these universally accepted ideas. Rather than inserting herself into pre-existing religious narratives, as other mystics in this study have done, Hildegard attempts to adjust the accepted conception of the female gender by inserting her own perspective and analysis. This can be seen very clearly in her treatment of the female body and its parallels to the earth.

The most obvious connection between the female body and the earth is the understanding of the female body as like the earth and man the farmer sowing the earth by impregnating the woman with his seed. This analysis has already been made extensively in articles such as, "Is Female to Male as Nature is to Culture?" by Sherry B Ortner, as well as "Putting Her in Her

Place: Women, Dirt, and Desire” by Anne Carson.¹¹⁰ With this context, Hildegard’s continuation of this pattern in her own writing seems, at first, to fully fit into this patriarchal conception of women. For instance, in the second vision of the first book of *Scivias*, she writes, “For the man is the sower, but the woman is the recipient of the seed. Wherefore a wife is under the power of her husband because the strength of the man is to the susceptibility of the woman as the hardness of stone is to the softness of earth.” (1.2§11)¹¹¹ She returns to this idea multiple times in *Scivias*, but rather than using this imagery to lower the status of women, she finds power within it.

In the third vision of the second book of *Scivias* she writes, “In this way the human race is begotten by men on women, as God made humanity from the mud of the earth; and as the earth in its freshness is constituted to bring forth from seeds the fruit of the field, so women are to bring forth children in the waters of birth.” (2.3§22)¹¹² While the first line reflects Hildegard’s traditional understanding of gender and birth, with childbirth being understood as something man does to or begets on to women, the following lines suggest another understanding. She compares a woman growing a child inside of her to God making humanity “from the mud of the earth.” While mud comes from the low places of nature, again associated with women, she assigns women the power of God in raising this mud to the level of humanity. She gives women further power in the following line stating that women who “bring forth” or raise children are like earth raising seeds into fruit. This suggests that women not only have the creative power to produce new life, but *transformative* power in their ability to raise these children. This deeply subverts the patriarchal medieval understanding of women as simple earth which is acted upon, an idea

¹¹⁰ Anne Carson, ‘Putting Her in Her Place: Woman, Dirt, and Desire’, in *Before Sexuality: The Construction of Erotic Experience in the Ancient Greek World*, ed. David M. Halperin, John J. Winkler, and Froma I. Zeitlin (Princeton University Press, 2020), doi:10.2307/j.ctv173f06d.

¹¹¹ Hildegard, *Scivias*, 77.

¹¹² Hildegard, *Scivias*, 177.

which Hildegard invokes in the very first line quoted, demonstrating the negotiations she was making in order to speak about God as a woman.

Hildegard uses this conception of sex as something which happens to women, rather than something they take an active part in, again to emphasize the religious power of women. This time, however, she finds this power in virginity and purity. In vision six of the second book of *Scivias*, she writes:

“For as a stalk of wheat, flourishing without pith, produces dry grain at the end of its pure spike, so too the blessed virgin, conceiving without male power, brought forth her most holy Son in simple innocence. He drew from His mother no sap of sin, because she conceived him without the pith of a man.” (2.6§26)¹¹³

This understanding of the virgin conception and birth carries with it radical implications about the nature of sex and sin. According to Hildegard, Christ was born completely innocent and free of sin because he was conceived “without the pith of a man.” Following this line of thinking, Hildegard appears to suggest that *all* sin comes from man’s sexual nature, an idea in radical opposition with the accepted story of Eve’s original sin and the general medieval understanding of women as tricksters and seducers. Again, Hildegard deeply subverts the traditional Christian understanding of women by using the patriarchal image of women as earth which is acted upon by man.

Finally, the imagery in Hildegard’s illuminations further suggest the subtle ways in which she was transforming the widely accepted understanding of women in the church. The third vision of the first book of *Scivias*, commonly titled Universe or Egg of the Universe in various translations, has always been understood to have connotations of birth, fertility, and creation. In regards to the shape she imagines, Matthew Fox writes, “No one can deny that this picture of the universe as an egg is a deeply feminine image.” (35).¹¹⁴ What very few scholars have drawn

¹¹³ Hildegard, *Scivias*, 179.

¹¹⁴ Matthew Fox and Hildegard, *Illuminations of Hildegard of Bingen* (Santa Fe, N.M: Bear & Co, 1985), 35.

attention to, however, is that this illumination may be deeply feminine in more ways than one, as the “egg” bears many similarities to a vagina. While the overall shape is certainly an egg, as Hildegard states multiple times, the presence of an inner and outer layer, two apertures in the center, and a star at the top of the egg suggest a bodily parallel which cannot be ignored.

Furthering this point is Hildegard’s description of the earth residing in the center of this egg:

“And in the midst of all these elements is a sandy globe of great magnitude, which these elements have so surrounded that it cannot waver in any direction. This openly shows that, of all the strengths of God’s creation, Man’s is most profound, made in a wondrous way with great glory from the dust of the earth and so entangled with the strengths of the rest of creation that he can never be separated from them.” (1.3§16)¹¹⁵

Considering Hildegard’s previous parallels between God creating humanity and women creating life, this illumination appears to be a continuation of these ideas. Again, she praises the creative powers of man on earth, highlighting how humanity was raised to “great glory” though coming from “the dust of the earth.” She then suggests that this is due to the way we are “so entangled with the strengths of the rest of creation,” alluding to the creation of the universe which she depicts in this illumination and which she suggests all humans “can never be separated from.” By imagining the creation of the universe in the form of the body part which brings humanity into this universe, Hildegard again finds power and proximity to God through a feminine aspect which men specifically cannot claim.

While this interpretation of the egg as vagina may seem presumptuous, it is of note that the first comment Hildegard makes about this illumination reads: “The visible and temporal is a manifestation of the invisible and eternal. God, Who made all things by His will... showing in them not just the things that are visible and temporal, but also the things that are invisible and eternal. Which is demonstrated by this vision you are perceiving.” (1.3§1).¹¹⁶ In her surreptitious

¹¹⁵ Hildegard, *Scivias*, 98.

¹¹⁶ Hildegard, *Scivias*, 94

way, Hildegard seems to suggest that her audience should understand any similarities to the temporal world in her illuminations as a suggestion of God's manifestation of the invisible world through visible markers. Specifically pointing out that this is "demonstrated by this vision you are perceiving," suggests that any similarities between the illumination and the vagina can be understood as God manifesting the eternal in the temporal. In this way, Hildegard subtly assigns women power and agency in their own bodies while still operating within the church's understanding of women as earth to be sown.

Moving now to Mechthild, her writing process didn't begin until the middle of the thirteenth century, thus reflecting a very different time and attitude towards female spirituality than that of Hildegard. Coming from a beguine background with no male establishment to derive authority from or be restricted by, Mechthild's visions are much more specific to her and center around the experiences of her body, rather than the cosmic body which Hildegard often imagines. This first manifests itself in the style of a romantic discourse between herself, always referred to as "the soul," and God. The brief poem, titled "How God compares the soul to four things" reads, "Thou art sweet as the grape; Fragrant as balsam; Bright as the sun— Thou art a heightening of My highest love!"¹¹⁷ Mechthild imagines God reciting courtlike poetry to her, comparing her to all the beautiful things in the world. The final line takes this a step further though, suggesting that Mechthild is a "heightened" version of all of the beautiful things God has just described and that she has been heightened by the "highest love" which he gives her. In this way, Mechthild finds power in romantic and feminine language. This style of writing comes up again in a poem titled, "God compares the soul to five things," which reads:

O lovely rose on the thorn!
 O hovering bee in the honey!
 O pure dove in thy being!

¹¹⁷ Mechthild (of Magdeburg), *The Revelations of Mechthild of Magdeburg (1210-1297)*, 11.

O glorious sun in thy shining!
 O full moon in thy course!
 From thee I will never turn away.¹¹⁸

In this poem, God praises the soul of Mechthild for following its exact course in the way God intended and which can be witnessed in the perfection of nature. Comparing Mechthild to a bee in honey or the moon on its course firmly establishes her as a woman behaving correctly, even perfectly, in the eyes of God. This is confirmed by her final line in which God promises he will never turn away from her.

Mechthild additionally compares the human body to the wonders of earth through a lengthy extended metaphor in a passage titled “A spiritual person is like a certain animal in thirty ways.” The passage begins with Mechthild, “a sorrowful soul,” crying out to God about her greatest wish which has been denied her: “a truly spiritual life.” She continues, “Alas! that has ever been out of my reach.” Considering Mechthild’s status as a beguine and the rites she was denied during her lifetime, this passage comes from a deeply personal place and further establishes how Mechthild’s spirituality has been contained to the experiences of her body, as she cannot have what she considers “a truly spiritual life” in the outside world of the church. God responds to her:

Our Lord showed me an insignificant little animal and said: “Look! Thou art like that little creature!” Then I saw how that creature was formed on an island in the sea, out of slime, and was trying to clean itself between the hot sun and the sea. Also that the sun was the creature’s father and the sea its mother and the slime the stuff of which it was made. Thus was Adam made out of poor material by the power of God.¹¹⁹

Responding to Mechthild’s sadness at her inability to have “a truly spiritual life” God reminds her both of where she came from and what she will become. Again, the female mystic imagines herself, or humanity as a whole, as coming from the lowest points of nature, recalling the low

¹¹⁸ Mechthild (of Magdeburg), *The Revelations of Mechthild of Magdeburg (1210-1297)*, 11.

¹¹⁹ Mechthild (of Magdeburg), *The Revelations of Mechthild of Magdeburg (1210-1297)*, 112.

aspects of nature which women were commonly associated with. In this instance the “insignificant little animal” is made of “slime,” formed from an island in the sea. The fact that the sun is the father and the sea is the mother of the creature further establishes the creature as a symbol of the earth, as the land of earth is what lives between the sun and the seas. However, the creature is also clearly a symbol for Mechthild, as God says, “Thou art like that little creature.” As Mechthild cannot have the truly spiritual life she desires, God first compares her to the insignificant slime creature desperate to clean itself. At the same time, however, he also compares her to Adam, stating that Adam too was, “made out of poor material by the power of God.” Notably, she compares herself to Adam, rather than Eve, and claims that she was made from the earth, rather than from Adam’s rib. In this way, Mechthild finds power in being made from “poor material,” as this is the original substance from which all humanity was made and which God raised up through his power.

Following this, Mechthild describes how the creature is raised by a desire to be closer to God. The passage continues:

The creature has a noble nature. It does not wish to stay in the sea where creatures fight and waters rage. It loves purity and so hastens up to the heights for it chooses and finds there the highest good. It ascends joyfully and climbs the highest trees where it rests in love and perfect freedom. Thus also does the loving soul.¹²⁰

This description of the creature abandoning the chaos of the sea for the heights of land further associates the creature with the earth. However, the earthiness of the creature does not cancel out its “noble nature.” While it is made of “slime” and “poor material,” it still loves purity and aspires towards its highest peaks. The description of the creature climbing the highest trees and resting in “love and perfect freedom,” additionally supports the idea that a creature of the lowest material of the earth, such as women, can reach the highest points of the earth by living a life of

¹²⁰ Mechthild (of Magdeburg), *The Revelations of Mechthild of Magdeburg (1210-1297)*, 113.

purity. The final line, “Thus also does the loving soul,” assigns real power to Mechthild, the loving soul herself. Describing herself as resting in perfect freedom and capable of choosing and finding the highest good suggests that she doesn’t need any authority to have the “truly spiritual life” she dreams of. Through this vision, she is told by God that her already noble nature and constant desire for purity allows her to have a truly spiritual life contained entirely to the experiences of her body on this earth.

As both of these mystics indicate, Christian women in the central middle ages had a very specific understanding of themselves and their bodies in relation to God. Coming from an earlier period and writing for a predominantly male audience, Hildegard more directly references the preexisting patriarchal notions of the female body and manages to subvert their meaning in subtle ways. Mechthild, coming at a later time and writing in a community of only women, emphasizes her own relationship with her body and God which she reconciles with the idea of the body as a microcosm of the earth. While she may begin like Adam, made from the lowest points of the earth, her purity and God’s love for her raises her to a level worthy of receiving and sharing God’s divine message.

b. Mahadeviyakka and Lalla

Turning now to the Hindu mystics, while an understanding of the body as a microcosm of the earth is central to a great deal of Hindu mysticism regardless of gender, I suggest that these women write about these ideas in a specifically semiotic way, invoking the instinctual experiences of their bodies and connecting these to the instinctive flow of nature which Shiva resides in. Also pertinent to this argument is the fact that both Mahadeviyakka and Lalla practiced renunciation in the form of complete nudity, something considered deeply controversial and transgressive specifically when done by women at this time. With this in mind, I suggest that

when these women refer to their own bodies, particularly their nudity, they are establishing their authority to practice in this way and invoking the approval of Shiva, as they could not receive this approval from the sects or communities they lived in.

First looking at Mahadeviyakka, on numerous occasions in her vachanas she emphasizes the irrelevance of clothing or, by extension, hiding oneself in any way from Shiva. For example, A.K Ramanujan translates a vacana which reads:

People,
 male and female,
 blush when a cloth covering their shame
 comes loose.
 When the lord of lives
 lives drowned without a face
 in the world, how can you be modest?
 When all the world is the eye of the lord,
 onlooking everywhere, what can you
 cover and conceal? ¹²¹

Mahadeviyakka begins this vacana with an observation on the cultural context she is emerging from. Significantly, she points out that both men and women, “blush when a cloth covering their shame comes loose,” indicating the universality of this experience. However, she then establishes herself as operating firmly outside of this system and feeling no shame in her nudity, as she challenges her listener by asking, “how can you be modest?” Her description of Shiva as living “drowned without a face in the world,” also has far reaching theological implications. As Shiva is faceless, one must understand the whole world to be the face of Shiva, confirmed by her stating that, “all the world is the eye of the lord, onlooking everywhere.” If this is the case, then the naked body of Mahadeviyakka simply becomes another part of the natural world which Shiva both exists in and constantly observes. There is nothing to “cover and conceal” because there is

¹²¹ Ramanujan, *Speaking of Śiva*, 130.

no point in covering something which is already inextricably merged with and watched over by Shiva.

This is further suggested by another vacana, in which she asks, “peel away every strip you wear, but can you peel the Nothing, the Nakedness that covers and veils? To the shameless girl wearing the White Jasmine Lord’s light of morning, you fool, where’s the need for cover and jewel?”¹²² In this way, Mahadeviyakka reverses the typical argument of women’s bodies needing to be covered due to their constant and inherent shamefulness. Mahadeviyakka radically calls herself “the shameless girl” and then, in turn, shames those who feel the need to conceal their nakedness from Shiva with “cover and jewel,” calling them fools. She additionally asserts how she is aware of the “Nothing” which conceals her and states she is wearing “the White Jasmine Lord’s light of morning,” again demonstrating how she finds agency and authority from the lived experience of her body which she aligns with Shiva.

Mahadeviyakka further articulates the idea of the body as a microcosm of the earth in vacanas which reckon with finding Shiva in the universe in the same way one must cultivate or find purity in one’s own body. This is first established in vacanas which find Shiva concealed in earthly things, such as one translated by Vijaya Chaitanya in his book *Songs for Siva* which begins, “Like treasure hidden by the earth.” The full vacana reads:

Like treasure hidden by the earth,
 Like taste hidden by the fruit,
 Like gold hidden by the stone,
 Like oil hidden by the sesame seed,
 Like fire hidden by the wood,
 Channamallikarjuna, jasmine-tender,
 Hides as the being behind becoming;
 No one knows him.¹²³

¹²² Ramanujan, *Speaking of Śiva*, 124.

¹²³ Vinaya Chaitanya, *Songs for Siva: Vacanas of Akka Mahadevi* (India: Harper Perennial, 2017), 32.

As this vacana demonstrates, Shiva is indeed found in every aspect of the earth. However, he is always hiding within these tangible things. Similar to Hildegard's invocation to her reader to understand "the visible and temporal," as a "manifestation of the invisible and eternal," Mahadeviyakka implores her listener to not take the world around them at face value. The fact that both these women make this sort of invocation further suggests their connection along semiotic lines, as they both invoke the idea of God's presence in this world being impossible to explain with words and suggest God can only be found through an awareness of the inconspicuous nature of the invisible and eternal. By suggesting that these aspects of God can only be found through some sort of instinctual connection beyond words, they grant themselves greater authority for being the ones who can see this eternal in the everyday. Distinguishing Mahadeviyakka from Hildegard here is her literal understanding of Shiva existing in these tangible parts of the earth, while Hildegard imagines these things on a more cosmic scale.

Another interesting aspect of this vacana is the way in which it suggests that aspects of nature must be dug up, cut, cooked, or burned to reveal their true Shiva nature. This follows Mahadeviyakka's overarching theology which believes that one must find Shiva within themselves and the world by doing intense self reflection and searching, the spiritual equivalent of digging up treasure or chiseling a rock to find gold. This connection is suggested by another vacana translated by Vijaya Chaitanya which he places immediately following the previous vacana in his book. The vacana reads:

When I did not know myself
Where were you, tell me?
Like the colour in gold,
You were in me.
Though you were in me,
I saw you as different,
O Channamallikarjuna, jasmine-tender!¹²⁴

¹²⁴ Chaitanya, *Songs for Siva*, 33.

Similar to how gold is hidden in the stone in the previous vacana, Shiva hides in the body of Mahadeviyakka “like the colour in gold.” Also similarly, this gold continues existing despite being hidden from its surrounding environment. In the same way, Shiva has always lived in Mahadeviyakka despite her inability to see it, as she states, “Though you were in me, I saw you as different.” In this way, Mahadeviyakka draws comparisons between herself and the earth which also contains multitudes that cannot always be seen. However, similar to the gold hiding in the stone, Mahadeviyakka tells her listener that Shiva lives in her in an illusive way which she had to uncover through internal reflection which she cannot fully explain with words. By paralleling her relationship with Shiva to Shiva’s relationship with the earth, illusive but constantly present, Mahadeviyakka grants herself a supreme authority and ability to speak on Shiva, while basing their relationship in something which cannot be articulated through language. This in conjunction with her shaming of others who cover themselves before Shiva, rather than walking naked, demonstrates how Mahadeviyakka turns her lack of knowledge on religious writing and systems into an advantage, claiming her relationship with Shiva is entirely intangible and lives in her body in the same way Shiva lives hidden throughout the entire universe.

Finally, we turn now to Lalla. Having spent her entire spiritual life wandering through the forest, Lalla’s poetry is already deeply embedded in the natural world she lived in. As such, she connects the body with nature in its most visceral terms, focusing on extreme instances of nature that highlight the transformative powers of the natural world. One vakh, translated by Hoskote, which highlights this understanding reads, “I hacked my way through six forests until the moon woke up inside me. The sky’s breath sang through me, dried up my body’s substance. I roasted

my heart in passion's fire and found Shankara!"¹²⁵ In an interesting poetic choice, Lalla takes an active role in finding Shankara through nature, as well as being inexplicably acted upon by nature. While she is the one hacking her way through six forests, the sky's breath sings through her in a seemingly unexplained way, drying up her body's substance in the process. Finally, she chooses to roast her heart in passion's fire which leads her to find shankara. This vakh captures the deeply collaborative way in which Lalla understands herself, Shiva, and the world around her. Based in the monistic Kashmir tradition she was emerging from, she finds her spiritual path to be happening in conjunction with the natural processes of the earth, as well as the sudden and inexplicable intervention of Shiva into her life, demonstrated in this vakh by the several interactions she describes between herself and nature which allow her to finally find Shiva.

This theme is continued in another series of vakhs which describes something from nature going through extreme circumstances and transformations in order to attain the most direct experience of Shiva. Over the course of two vakhs, Lalla imagines herself as a cotton flower. The vakhs read in the Hoskote translation:

I, Lalla, set out to bloom like a cotton flower.
 The cleaner tore me, the carder shredded me on his bow.
 That gossamer: that was I
 the spinning woman lifted from her wheel.
 At the weaver's, they hung me out on the loom (102)
 First the washerman pounded me on his washing stone
 scrubbed me with clay and soap.
 Then the tailor measured me, piece by piece,
 with his scissors. Only then could I, Lalla,
 find the road to heaven. (103)¹²⁶

The Grierson translation also pairs these two vakhs together. The presence of Lalla's signature, or ankitta, "I, Lalla," also emphasizes how these vakhs are central to the canon of her poems.

This follows the general idea of union with Shiva in Lalla's writing as being a process which

¹²⁵ Hoskote and Laldyada, *I, Lalla*, 49.

¹²⁶ Hoskote and Laldyada, *I, Lalla*, 102-103.

requires real work and transformation. She first describes how she “set out” to remain as part of nature and “bloom like a cotton flower,” associating herself with a particularly feminine image of nature. This feminine imagery continues in this vakh, but with notable adjustments, as she describes the process of turning cotton into clothing in quite aggressive terms. She is shredded, hung, pounded, scrubbed, and cut with scissors before she is finally able to “find the road to heaven,” or, as it states in the Grierson translation, “obtain the way of the Supreme.”¹²⁷ In both translations, the cotton flower, Lalla, must go through extreme conditions and transformations in order to understand the right way of obtaining union with Shiva.

Many scholarly interpretations of this vakh have understood it as Lalla attempting to destroy any sense of individuality or bodily nature which is preventing her from reaching Shiva. Hoskote asserts this in the notes to his translation of this vakh, writing, “her body-centred consciousness, her sense of personality, must be beaten out of her.”¹²⁸ However, the feminine associations Lalla wields in this vakh suggest that this vakh may not be referring to her literal body, but her social one. While she begins with the romantic idea that she will “bloom like a cotton flower,” the patriarchal world quickly pounds this notion out of her, as the vakh depicts. Just as the free cotton flower is turned into a fixed object which serves others, the social world attempts to turn Lalla from a free individual into an object which serves a specific purpose, as a woman is understood to serve her purpose as a wife, mother, and daughter-in-law. Jaishree Kak Odin takes a similar approach to analysis of this vakh in his book “The Mystical Verses of Lalla,” where he writes, “Her social self is thus a creation of others to be put in service for others.”¹²⁹ This socializing process is described in the first vakh, as she is most violently torn,

¹²⁷ Laldyada and Grierson, *Lalla-Vakyani or the Wise Sayings of Lal-Ded - A Mystic Poetess of Ancient Kashmir*, 115.

¹²⁸ Hoskote and Laldyada, *I, Lalla*, 229.

¹²⁹ Laldyada and Jaishree Kak Odin, *Mystical Verses of Lallā: A Journey of Self Realization*, 1st ed (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 2007), 5.

shredded, and hung out. The following vakh, however, depicts how Lalla rejected this social self and found Shiva by doing so. She describes being cleaned, scrubbed, and eventually cut into pieces. However, she is never sewn into a completed garment to be used for the service of society.

While the first vakh describes the social forces of patriarchy acting on her, the second vakh depicts Lalla attempting to purify herself from these social ills (cleaning and scrubbing) before completely reconstructing her identity by finding unification with everything around her (cutting herself into pieces). By rejecting the limitations of being a woman in the social world, Lalla can finally “find the road to heaven” which does not require her to be servile or limited, but instead cuts her into pieces which allows her to experience the entire universe. However, this does not mean complete eradication of the self or the body, as Hoskote suggests. This is indicated by the presence of her signature, “I, Lalla,” both at the beginning of the first vakh and the end of the second. While she may have stripped herself of her social gender, the cotton flower which is Lalla still remains hidden within her and is able to bloom through union with Shiva, essentially returning her to the natural world which she comes from and which is not restricted by the social confines of gender.

Finally, interesting parallels between the self and the natural world in the vakhs of Lalla emerge due to the complexity of the Kashmiri language which allows for multiple interpretations, or perhaps intentional puns, of the same vakh. This is most notable in a vakh which was examined earlier and which Hoskote only translates in one way, reading: “Wrapped up in Yourself, You hid from me. All day I looked for You and when I found You hiding inside me, I ran wild, playing now me, now You.”¹³⁰ Grierson and Coleman Barks both point out in their translations that, “the words for ‘me’ and ‘you’ may be read together, in which case they

¹³⁰ Hoskote and Laldyada, *I, Lalla*, 80.

become one word meaning ‘mud.’”¹³¹ This understanding of “me and you” appears to follow the deeply collaborative and non-duel way with which Lalla understood Shiva and the spiritual experience, suggesting some validity to the idea that this double meaning was intentional and may even have been understood as a pun by local contemporaries of her time. With this linguistic understanding, Barks alternative translation of the vakh reads:

Covered with mud, I spent the entire day
 looking for mud! Now I see
 what’s all over me
 and give in to loving it!¹³²

The Grierson translation leans into this understanding of mud even further, reading:

My body befouled I with mud, and Thou remainedst hidden from me.
 The livelong day I passed seeking for mud.
 When I beheld the mud upon my body,
 I gave my body the unrestrained rapture (of union) with the mud.¹³³

At the heart of both these translations is the idea explored earlier of women being represented by or associated with the lowest parts of the earth; in this instance, mud. In her article, “Putting Her in Her Place: Women, Dirt, and Desire,” classicist Anne Carson traces the association of women with dirt through ancient Greek philosophy and literature. She states that the reason for this association with dirt is that, “dirt may be defined as matter out of place,” or, “matter that has crossed a boundary that it ought not to have crossed.” She continues that this is understood as analogous with womanhood as women are, “intimate with formlessness and the unbounded in their alliance with the wet, the wild, and raw nature.”¹³⁴ In this instance, the formless and unbound nature of Lalla is specifically what allows her to find Shiva.

¹³¹ Laldyada, *Naked Song*, 35.

¹³² Laldyada, *Naked Song*, 35.

¹³³ Laldyada and Grierson, *Lalla-Vakyani or the Wise Sayings of Lal-Ded - A Mystic Poetess of Ancient Kashmir*, 63.

¹³⁴ Carson, ‘Before Sexuality’, 158–59.

The first line of Barks' translation highlights this celebration of formlessness, as she states, "Covered with mud, I spent the entire day looking for mud!" This emphasizes the non-dual and non-linear way through which Lalla understands everything, including herself. In both Barks' and Grierson's translations they emphasize how Lalla comes to love the mud which covers her body. Rather than understanding mud as matter which is out of place and thus polluting, she finds that surrounding herself with that which is out of place allows her to exist in a state of being permanently boundless. This follows the deeply independent and nature oriented way Lalla lived her life, never settling down in one community and constantly wandering alone. The last line of Grierson's translation reads, "I gave my body the unrestrained rapture (of union) with the mud."¹³⁵ The way in which Lalla is described as giving *herself* rapture through union with the mud demonstrates the power she assigns herself by invoking the inherent bodily connection she is understood to have with this low part of the earth. As the more straightforward Hoskote translation of this vakh demonstrates, this vakh is about finding Shiva within oneself and experiencing utter joy from this realization. By having an alternative meaning to this vakh in which she finds this same joy through union with mud highlights how formlessness, understood through the formless nature of raw earth such as mud or cotton flower, is embedded into the very language of Lalla's vakhs. By associating herself with the unbound qualities of the natural world, she is able to invoke her instinctual connection to Shiva in a way which doesn't require validation from any religious authority.

Part Two: Internalization of Ritual

a. Hildegard and Mechthild

¹³⁵ Laldyada and Grierson, *Lalla-Vakyanis or the Wise Sayings of Lal-Ded - A Mystic Poetess of Ancient Kashmir*, 63.

Ritual processes are deeply central to both medieval Christianity and Hinduism. They shaped the physical space religious people lived in, as well as informing the everyday habits and routine for devotees. In *The Sacred and the Profane*, Mircea Eliade famously delved into the nature of sacred spaces and ritual behavior. He writes, “For religious man, space is not homogeneous; he experiences interruptions, breaks in it; some parts of space are qualitatively different from others.” For this reason, “There is, then, a sacred space, and hence a strong, significant space; there are other spaces that are not sacred and so are without structure or consistency, amorphous.”¹³⁶ Again, women find themselves in the amorphous or formless space, as they lack access to certain sacred spaces and rituals. Particularly in Christianity, the decrees against women preaching prevented them from experiencing many rituals reserved for superiors in the church. Additionally, Mechthild’s status as a beguine who openly spoke out against corruption in the church led to her being deprived of communion and the daily offices. As such, she internalizes ritual to a deeply personal and romantic degree. As the works of these women demonstrate, being excluded from sacred spaces and experiences leads devotees to find sacred spaces within themselves. The potential of hosting a sacred space in one’s body recalls themes of Marian devotion, further demonstrating how these women used the popular images of women at this time to their advantage and to assign themselves agency within religious space.

Again, going in chronological order, we begin with Hildegard. In general, Hildegard utilizes the most indirect methods which allow her to have a direct experience of ritual. While Hildegard would be the Mother Superior of multiple churches in her lifetime, she was keenly aware of the ordinances against female preaching in Christianity and even directly supported these measures in her own writing. However, these sections demonstrate some of the clearest

¹³⁶ Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, trans. Willard R. Trask, A Harvest Book (San Diego: Harcourt, Brace, 1987), 20.

negotiations Hildegard is making which allow her to find alternative forms of power and agency within the Church.

One of the most significant ways Hildegard internalizes ritual is by inserting herself into the prophetic and apostolic tradition by exegeting sections of the Old and New Testament. Every illumination in *Scivias* includes some form of this analysis in the accompanying text, demonstrating the significance this held to Hildegard. This distinguishes Hildegard from the other three mystics examined in this project, as they all place themselves primarily outside of the literary tradition due to their lack of access to religious texts written in their own vernacular. However, even with more access and knowledge of religious texts, Hildegard does not present this analysis from her own perspective. Instead she takes on the voice of God who declares a definitive interpretation of various sections of the Bible. These portions of Hildegard's writing all follow a fairly similar structure. In the second vision of the first book of *Scivias*, for instance, there is a section titled, "Words of the apostle on this subject." This form of title is used for all of these biblical analysis sections, such as Words of Solomon (2.7§24) or Words of John (2.5§8).

Additionally, she often transitions into these sections beginning with a more personal introduction of the prophet or apostle, highlighting the perspective of God which she takes on in her writing. For example, in the second vision of the first book she begins, "as my friend Paul witnesses when he says:" (1.2§12). She then writes, "'As the woman is of the man, so is the man for the woman; but all are from God' [1 Corinthians 11:12]. Which is to say: Woman was created for the sake of man, and man for the sake of woman." (1.2§13).¹³⁷ Generally, this is the format which Hildegard follows when doing biblical analysis. First, she presents the quote directly. Then, she writes something like "which is to say" or "What does this mean?" before telling her reader exactly what is being said in the passage she analyzes. This direct and matter-of-fact form

¹³⁷ Hildegard, *Scivias*, 78.

of exegesis can only be carried out through the visionary power of Hildegard which allows her to speak with the authority of God. This places her in a higher position than even a priest, as she is able to claim knowledge of the direct word of God through her visionary experiences, while a priest can only suggest their own interpretation. In the selection quoted above, this has powerful implications, as she states that, definitively, women and men were both created “for the sake” of the opposite gender. Again, Hildegard radically goes against typical interpretations of Eve and Genesis, finding that, while women may have been made from the rib of man, they “all are from God,” and thus are equal in their obligation to the other.

Hildegard additionally grants herself access to ritual in her visions which involve actual holy rites. The most notable example of this takes place in the sixth vision of book two of *Scivias* in which Hildegard witnesses the Holy of Holies. She describes witnessing this most sacred and secluded place in the church which only the highest priest may access, writing:

And it irradiates [the offering] completely with light, as the sun illumines anything its rays shine through; in the power of the Father the holy heat so strikes the sparkling circle of that oblation that the radiant splendor wholly enters into the thing it falls upon. What does this mean? The Bride of My Son offers the gift of bread and wine on My altar with a most devoted purpose.” (2.6§11)¹³⁸

There is much to analyze here. First, Hildegard describes the exact process which is meant to be reserved to only the highest authority in the church. The Holy of Holies began in the ancient Hebrew ritual of sacrifice on Yom Kippur in which the highest rabbi makes an offering only once a year at the time when the sun will hit the altar and offering in such a way that the Rabbi would witness and feel the presence of God. This concept was then appropriated by Christianity, as a way of conceiving of the holiest place in the church where a high priest might bear witness to Christ. Hildegard completely circumvents the exclusive nature of this tradition, describing

¹³⁸ Hildegard, *Scivias*, 243.

precisely what it looks like in her vision and how it feels in the experience of her body. She then further establishes her authority on such a subject by asking, “What does this mean?” taking on the same language she uses when speaking from the perspective of God in her biblical analysis. She finally concludes that God approves of her taking part in this ritual stating, “The Bride of My Son offers the gift of bread and wine on My altar with a most devoted purpose.” This specification of Hildegard being the “Bride” of Christ demonstrates how Hildegard is not required to lose her femininity in order to take place in this ritual, but actually gets access to this ritual specifically because of her female and bride-like status which allows her to serve Christ with a “most devoted purpose.”

Finally, there is a fascinating contradiction lying at the heart of Hildegard’s work and life. As discussed earlier, she strictly adheres to many conservative perspectives of the medieval church. Nowhere is this more clear than her stance on female preaching. In the sixth vision of the second book of *Scivias*, the same one in which she witnesses the Holy of Holies, she writes: “So too those of female sex should not approach the office of My altar; for they are infirm and weak habitation, appointed to bear children and diligently nurture them.” (2.6§76).¹³⁹ This is one of Hildegard’s most straightforwardly misogynistic moments, as she follows patriarchal understandings of women as too “infirm and weak” to hold a position of any authority. However, she provides a curious loophole to this understanding in the immediately following sentence, again using the idea of women’s body as the earth to support her point:

A woman conceives a child not by herself but through a man, as the ground is plowed not by itself but by a farmer. Therefore, just as the earth cannot plow itself, a woman must not be a priest and do the work of consecrating the body and blood of my son; **though she can sing the praise of her Creator, as the earth can receive rain to water its fruits.** And as the earth brings forth all fruits, so in Woman the fruit of all good works is perfected. (2.6§76)¹⁴⁰

¹³⁹ Hildegard, *Scivias*, 278.

¹⁴⁰ Hildegard, *Scivias*, 278.

This section perfectly captures the subtle way in which Hildegard finds a place for women within the religious and ritual space. While she agrees that because women are like earth they cannot carry out work (ritual) upon the earth, she inserts the caveat that women *can* “sing the praise of her creator, as the earth can receive rain to water its fruits.” Hildegard’s poetic phrasing here leaves this open to vast interpretation and grants women a significant role within the religious system, equal in importance to systemized rituals such as the consecration of communion. Her conclusion carries even greater implications, as she states that, by singing the praises of her creator, “in Woman the fruit of all good works is perfected.” In a powerful transformation of traditional misogyny, Hildegard finds that women can perfect the praise of God and, through this, create perfection on Earth in a way which men cannot. This is particularly relevant to Hildegard who spent the majority of her life singing the praises of Christ. There are, in fact, more surviving chants by Hildegard than any other composer from the entire middle ages. While the musical output of Hildegard is so prolific it cannot be fully examined within the parameters of this project, this fact alone indicates that Hildegard understood the role of women as those who sing the praise of their creator in a deeply serious way and did not consider it to be any less important than the work of her male counterparts. Through her music, Hildegard was able to perfect the fruit of her good works in a manner outside of the realm of male ritual authority.

Mechthild internalizes ritual in a distinctly different way from Hildegard, focusing more on removing the presence of other people from ritual behavior and internalizing the ritual experience within her own body. She is not as concerned with finding loopholes which allowed for female involvement in the church as she operated so firmly outside of traditional and patriarchal masculinity. She also focuses a great deal on the life of Christ, inserting herself into

the narrative by having visions of being alongside Christ or having conversations with apostles, saints, and others who lived alongside him.

Most notably, Mechthild describes, in multiple visions, herself living out the life of Christ.¹⁴¹ In this way, Mechthild inserts herself into the biblical narrative in a way typically reserved for men. Mendicant communities which aspired toward living in a Christ-like fashion, such as the Franciscans, often did not allow for women to enter the fold, as they were considered unfit for the lifestyle of wandering poverty.¹⁴² By experiencing the actual life of Jesus through her visions, Mechthild elevates herself to the level of these men, or even beyond it, as she can have the complete bodily experience of the life of Christ. This is most clear in a passage from the third part of *The Flowing Light of the Godhead* in which she describes a “longing soul,” Mechthild, who is, “betrayed in true love, in sighing after God.” Most significant in this passage is the way Mechthild integrates the story of Christ with her own struggles. She writes:

She is dragged before the Judge in trembling shame because God is so often withdrawn from her on account of her sins. She answers all things modestly and would not willingly vex any. Her cheeks are buffeted in the Tribune when devils assail her spirit. She is taken before Herod when she recognizes herself as worthless and unworthy and despises herself in thinking of her great Lord.¹⁴³

As this passage indicates, Mechthild’s biggest struggle is her understanding of herself as worthless and her weakness when she feels abandoned by God. In this section, she parallels this struggle with Jesus’ experience in the court of Herod. Similar to the doubt and derision Herod casts at Jesus, Mechthild reckons with feelings of uncertainty regarding her relationship with

¹⁴¹ Mechthild (of Magdeburg), *The Revelations of Mechthild of Magdeburg (1210-1297)*, 16, 52-54, 78-79.

¹⁴² This is exemplified by the story of Saint Clare of Assisi, one of the first followers of Francis of Assisi. She asked Francis to let her live in the same way he did, as a wandering mendicant, but was rejected and instructed to form her own order of women. Following this, she formed her own order, the Order of Poor Ladies, and wrote their *Rule of Life*, the first set of monastic guidelines written by a woman.

¹⁴³ Mechthild (of Magdeburg), *The Revelations of Mechthild of Magdeburg (1210-1297)*, 78.

God which cause her to doubt herself in the way Herod doubted Christ. Mechthild takes this connection between herself and Jesus even further, as she continues:

She hangs high on the Cross of Love in the pure air of the Holy Spirit, turned towards the Son of the living Godhead, oblivious of all earthly things. Thus, in a holy end, she is taken down from the cross and says: ‘Father, receive my spirit. It is finished.’ She is laid in a sealed grave of deep humility for she has ever known herself the most unworthy of all creatures. She rises happily on Easter Day having joyfully conversed with her Love in the night.¹⁴⁴

In a shocking turn, Mechthild inserts the words of Christ, perhaps his most famous ever, into her own mouth, as she describes her own crucifixion, notably on the “Cross of Love.” In this way, Mechthild grants herself an authority not unlike Hildegard but, unlike Hildegard, this authority comes from a deeply personal place, as her loving relationship with Christ allows her to experience the way he lived on this earth while confined to the experiences of her own body. Additionally, she still holds onto her femininity in this vision, as indicated by the continuous use of the pronoun ‘she,’ but also through her designation of herself as “the most unworthy of all creatures.” This distinction separates her from the male wandering mendicants of her time, as she is not attempting to live the actual life of Christ in her everyday behavior and making herself worthy through this. Instead, she reintegrates the story of Christ’s passion into her own life as a reflection of the closeness of her relationship with Christ and her own lowliness which she parallels with the lowliness which Christ experienced in his final days.

In a more direct form of internalizing ritual, Mechthild also describes visions of Mass and other ritual experiences which take place internally specifically because she has been denied those rites in her daily life. Mechthild describes this herself at numerous times throughout the book, most notably in a passage from the third part of the book where she describes herself as “a sorrowful soul” who is lamenting to God. She writes, “Ah! Lord! now am I so poor in my ailing

¹⁴⁴ Mechthild (of Magdeburg), *The Revelations of Mechthild of Magdeburg (1210-1297)*, 79.

body, so exiled in my soul and so deprived of spiritual privileges that no one reads Thy Offices before me, or celebrates the Holy Sacrament of the Mass.”¹⁴⁵ God’s response to Mechthild’s lament recalls the parallels between her and Christ which were examined in the previous passage. He tells her, “I must yet teach thee. For training costs noble maidens dear, They must conquer themselves in all their sufferings, And often tremble before their disciplinarian. That, too, is the lot of My brides on earth.”¹⁴⁶

This section demonstrates how acutely aware of the difficulties that arise for a woman attempting to live a “truly spiritual life” Mechthild was. She seems to suggest here that “training,” practicing religious life, is something which causes more suffering for women who “tremble before their disciplinarian.” This understanding of suffering being increased by entering religious life is relatively specific to women in Christianity, as male monasticism is intended to remove men from temptation and, thus, from suffering. This is confirmed to be the case in Mechthild’s understanding, as she writes, “That, too, is the lot of My brides on earth.” However, this statement is followed by an assurance from God, stating, “My enemies held My death dreadfully before My eyes and I had to bear mockery and poverty. But in all that I trusted in the unspeakable goodness of My Father. Order thou thy courage after that pattern!”¹⁴⁷ Again, Mechthild is comforted about her inability to have the spiritual life she desires by the life of Christ, who was also mocked for his spirituality and held in contempt by his disciplinarians. By including this vision of Christ telling Mechthild to order her courage “after that pattern,” Mechthild validates her own nontraditional religious experience, as she is told by Christ himself that she must simply trust that God loves her as He trusted in his Father and, in doing this, she can find courage. As Mechthild would spend her lifetime speaking and recording these visions of

¹⁴⁵ Mechthild (of Magdeburg), *The Revelations of Mechthild of Magdeburg (1210-1297)*, 72.

¹⁴⁶ Mechthild (of Magdeburg), *The Revelations of Mechthild of Magdeburg (1210-1297)*, 73.

¹⁴⁷ Mechthild (of Magdeburg), *The Revelations of Mechthild of Magdeburg (1210-1297)*, 73.

Christ, it is clear that she held onto this message and was able to find courage by placing faith outside of any sacred space or ritual and into the loving heart of Jesus.

Finally, in a passage from the second part of the book, Mechthild describes an extended vision of a Mass which she receives through internal intervention from God. Mechthild specifies this in the passage, as she calls out to God saying, “Ah! dear Lord! Must I be without Mass this day?” This is followed by her stating that, “On that desire God took from her the earthly senses and brought her wondrously into a great church.”¹⁴⁸ This highlights the internal way in which Mechthild receives her visions, being removed from “earthly senses” and entering into a space within her mind and body which is simultaneously beyond anything on this earth. As the vision continues, Mechthild experiences a Mass organized by some of the greatest figures in the New Testament. She describes John the Baptist bringing an offering for the mass, writing, “He carried a white lamb on his breast and had two hanging lamps in his hands. He went to the altar and set the lamb thereon and bowed himself lovingly before it. That was John the Baptist who should sing the Mass.”¹⁴⁹ This inclusion of John the Baptist as singing the mass in her vision demonstrates how Mechthild’s visionary ability allows her to transcend the earthly mass. She continues in this way, describing Mary, mother of Christ, as preceding over the communion. Mechthild states, ““ Ah! Lady! Could I but receive the Body of the Lord! For here there is nothing of which to be afraid’ The mother of God replied: ‘Yes! dear Child! Make your confession!’”¹⁵⁰ As communion was one of the main rites denied to Mechthild, the fact that Mary is the one who gives her communion seems particularly poignant, placing a woman in a position of power in the church, as well as continuing the parallel of Mechthild being like Christ.

¹⁴⁸ Mechthild (of Magdeburg), *The Revelations of Mechthild of Magdeburg (1210-1297)*, 32.

¹⁴⁹ Mechthild (of Magdeburg), *The Revelations of Mechthild of Magdeburg (1210-1297)*, 33.

¹⁵⁰ Mechthild (of Magdeburg), *The Revelations of Mechthild of Magdeburg (1210-1297)*, 35.

This section of *The Flowing Light of the Godhead* ends with a particularly visceral image which captures the internal and sensory way in which Mechthild reimagined ritual. She writes:

Then the maid went up to the Altar with great love and widely opened soul. John the Baptist took the white Lamb with the red wounds and laid it on the mouth of the maid. Thus the pure Lamb laid itself on its own image in the stall of her body and sucked her heart with its tender lips. The more it sucked the more she gave herself to it.¹⁵¹

This remarkable vision, expanding on the image of the bleeding lamb in Revelation 5, demonstrates the unique way in which Mechthild relocated ritual. As she cannot receive communion in the form of wafer and wine, she envisions herself being given the body and blood of Christ in his form of sacrificial lamb. Again, when faced with rituals she cannot receive, Mechthild reimagines them on a far more personal and intimate level which, by extension, elevates her to the level of a biblical figure. The description of the lamb lying “itself on its own image in the stall of her body,” further highlights the way in which Mechthild understands herself as a mirror of Christ. While she is an entity both distinct from and significantly lower than Christ, they have a symbiotic relationship, reflected in their mutual love for each other, which allows Mechthild to communicate his messages.

The conclusion of the passage, “The more it sucked the more she gave herself to it,” highlights this mutual and collaborative way through which she understood her relationship with God. The fact that Mechthild’s version of communion is a kind of mutual consumption between her and Christ, rather than just the devotee receiving the body of Christ, demonstrates the unique gifts she is granted due to her closeness with God. While Mechthild is clearly unhappy to be denied from rituals and the “truly spiritual life” she desires, she reconciles this with a visionary reconstruction of ritual which allows her to speak directly with Christ and other biblical figures,

¹⁵¹ Mechthild (of Magdeburg), *The Revelations of Mechthild of Magdeburg (1210-1297)*, 36.

as well as elevating her loving relationship with Jesus which allows her to experience these rituals in more visceral and bodily terms than men

b. Mahadeviyakka and Lalla

Ritual takes on a very different meaning when looking at the Hindu mystics examined in this project. With both Mahadeviyakka and Lalla coming from groups which went against the traditional Brahmanical style of ritual practice, there is a certain degree of internalization of ritual present in all writings from Virashaivism and Kashmir Shaivism, regardless of gender. However, both Mahadeviyakka and Lalla find ways of feminizing this idea, either by romanticizing Shiva or emphasizing the role of their bodies. Additionally, the fact that in both of these groups women could not be gurus, and thus could not participate in the initiations and rituals which come with being a guru, demonstrates how their hostility toward traditional ritual may have a more personal basis than male devotees. Finally, the fact that both Mahadeviyakka and Lalla abandoned their gurus, breaking off from the traditional path of most Shaiva devotees, raises serious questions about their feelings toward their communities and the exclusion they may have faced while in these groups. This may also have been influenced by the violence between men which flourished in these communities, particularly in Virashaivism. Both women emphasize their desire to be entirely alone and untethered to any place. Thus, they find ways of conducting or transcending ritual within their own bodies, eliminating the need for a religious authority or sacred space.

Again, going in chronological order, we turn first to Mahadeviyakka. Similar to Hildegard, she remained in a primarily male space which afforded some, but not all, access to women. As such, Mahadeviyakka operates firmly within this structure, often singing praises of her guru, despite the fact that she abandons this structure later in her life. Certain *vacanas* of hers

highlight the frustrations she may have had with her community which led to her eventual departure. In a translation by Vinaya Chaitanya, she writes:

What can I know of the initiations, O lord?
 I shall remain ever a servant to the servants
 Of the wise ones who dedicate themselves
 To the guru, the linga and the mendicant,
 And thus are freed from egoism.
 Therefore I know none
 Other than the retinue of
 Channamallikarjuna, jasmine-tender¹⁵²

This title, “servant to the servants,” aptly summarizes the understanding of women which was common in these sects. While theoretically all devotees would be equal in their status as servants to Shiva, women are forever trapped in the role of “servant to the servants,” due to their inability to reach guru status. This is confirmed by Mahadeviyakka’s opening line, “What can I know of the initiations, O lord?” which refers specifically to the guru initiation ritual which is considered one of the most significant in Shaivism. Richard Davis points this out in his book *Worshipping Śiva in Medieval India*, where he describes the “special initiation, *viśesadīksā*” which allows one to “worship Śiva on his own behalf.” He writes, “When the soul is then returned to the novice’s body, he has been reborn as a ‘son of Śiva’ (putraka).”¹⁵³ The fact that masculinity is so ingrained into the very language surrounding the ultimate initiation of Shaivism demonstrates how, while aspiring toward the dissolution of all binaries in theory, the actual ritual world of Shaivism was still rife with gendered differences and the subordination of women.

While this vacana seems to suggest that Mahadeviyakka is resigned to this secondary status, the final line of the vacana may suggest otherwise. As she states, “Therefore I know none Other than the retinue of Channamallikarjuna,” she suggests that being kept in this lowly

¹⁵² Chaitanya, *Songs for Śiva*, 44.

¹⁵³ Richard Davis, *Worshipping Śiva in Medieval India: Ritual in an Oscillating Universe* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 2000), 91.

position has only brought her closer to Shiva. Reading the final line as a direct response to the opening question of the vacana, Mahadeviyakka seems to find power in the way she is kept out of initiations, as this has condensed her relationship with Shiva to its purest, most unmediated form. Mahadeviyakka leaving her community and her role as “servant to the servants,” demonstrates how she sought to make this relationship even more unmediated by cutting out any middle men and living alone in a place where she literally knew “none Other than the retinue of Channamallikarjuna.”

Additionally, Mahadeviyakka rejects ritual in a traditional Virashaiva way but feminizes this sense of rejection through romantic language. She locates ritual in the body, rather than in the temple, and highlights the way in which ritual is not needed for one who truly understands their body as a microcosm of the earth, a concept which, as explored earlier, has inherently feminine associations. In one vacana translated by Vinaya Chaitanya she writes:

If the breath itself is fragrant, who needs flowers?
 If one has patience, calmness, peace and forbearance
 What need is there for the final peace of samadhi?
 If one becomes the world itself
 What need for solitude
 Channamallikarjuna, jasmine-tender?¹⁵⁴

In this vacana, Mahadeviyakka systematically points out the pointlessness of ritual, going from easiest to hardest in terms of practice. She begins by critiquing the nature of traditional puja, worship ritual, where flowers are commonly given as an offering to shrines. She reimagines this form of worship as the very expulsion of her breath, as she states when one has breath which is already “fragrant,” there is no need for flowers. This assigns her with great power while also highlighting the assurance she has in herself, as she clearly believes that her “breath itself” has become fragrant through spiritual work and self-reflection, thus bringing her closer to Shiva and

¹⁵⁴ Chaitanya, *Songs for Siva*, 46.

removing the need for puja. She continues, describing how a life of patience and calm should free one from feeling they need “the final peace of samadhi,” complete dissolution of the self through union with the divine. Again, Mahadeviyakka chastises those who concern themselves with rituals as indications of their relationship with Shiva and conceptions of themselves, while elevating herself for having already found assurance in these things through internal practice. Her concluding question, “If one becomes the world itself/ What need for solitude,” again demonstrates the supreme power she assigns herself in this vacana, despite not being able to reach the final stage of guru. Rather than believing she needs to follow one specific path, Mahadeviyakka cultivates her interior self, becoming the world itself, which allows her to directly experience Shiva on her own terms. Similar to her consideration of the final peace of samadhi, Mahadeviyakka reconciles her inability to reach the final stages of spiritual life with her ability to experience complete union with Shiva in this lifetime by finding him everywhere in the world around her. In this way, she finds power in her separation from the ritual world, choosing instead to become “the world itself.”

In this last vacana, Mahadeviyakka internalizes ritual in a similar mode to Hildegard and Mechthild, inserting herself into the ancient epics and narratives of Hinduism and claiming authority through this. This vacana, translated by A.K Ramanujan, is one of the longest by Mahadeviyakka and includes many references to famed relics, gifts from nature, and holy sites which are described in Hindu epics. She writes:

Every tree
 in the forest was the All-giving tree,
 every bush
 the life-reviving herb,
 every stone the Philosopher’s Stone,
 all the land a pilgrim’s holy place,
 all the water nectar against age,
 every beast the golden deer,

every pebble I stumble on
 the Wishing Crystal:
 walking round
 the Jasmine Lord's favourite hill,
 I happened
 on the Plantain Grove.¹⁵⁵

Every line of this vacana includes a reference to a concept in Hinduism which could be explored independently at great length. The first line refers to Kalpavriksha, essentially the Hindu version of the tree of life, which originated in a story from Vishnu Purana, one of the major texts of Hinduism composed anywhere between 400 BCE and the ninth century. The tree is described as emerging during the samudra manthana, churning of the ocean of milk, in which the elixir of immortal life was also created, described later in the vacana as “nectar against age.” The next concept referenced in the vacana is the life-reviving herb, or Sanjeevani. Sanjeevani was first described in the Hindu epic the Ramayana, written between the 8th and 4th centuries BCE, as an herb needed to heal one who has been badly wounded. Notably, the herb is never able to be isolated, giving it a legendary status as people still unsuccessfully search for the real sanjeevani.

Taking into consideration the legendary and undiscoverable status of these items in conjunction with the rest of the vacana demonstrates how Mahadeviyakka uses these legends to subvert typical understandings of religious access for women. Again, her writing focuses on finding Shiva in the world around her. However, in this instance, she describes how the world has become elevated through her direct connection with Shiva, allowing her to find the epic in her everyday surroundings. When she states that she saw, “every bush the life-reviving herb,” she connects herself to the epic tradition which came thousands of years before her and grants herself access to its most legendary aspects. Similar to Hildegard's envisioning of the Holy of Holies, Mahadeviyakka describes objects and entities which would be impossible for her to ever

¹⁵⁵ Ramanujan, *Speaking of Śiva*, 133.

see in her actual life. Despite this, she claims to witness these things not just once, but in every aspect of nature she encounters. She distinctly places herself in this narrative, not simply imagining some utopian garden world, by stating, “every pebble I stumble upon the wishing crystal,” another reference to a mythical object from the churning of the ocean of milk. Through this line, Mahadeviyakka gives herself tremendous power, as she stumbles upon that which others have spent centuries looking for and which is commonly understood as only being possessed by the gods.

In the final line of this vacana, Mahadeviyakka states that, “walking around the Jasmine Lord’s favourite hill, I happened on the Plantain Grove.” The “Plantain Grove” carries many associations with it. Plantains or bananas, kadali in sanskrit, hold a general significance in Hinduism due to their association with the deity Hanuman. Hanuman makes his first appearance in the Ramayana as a divine monkey who is devoted to Rama. The image of the plantain grove becomes associated with him in the ancient epic Mahabharata where he is depicted as an immortal being resting in a field of bananas, kadali-vana in sanskrit, which Bhima begins to destroy before being chastised by Hanuman for his cruelty and misuse of power. These examples from the most famous Hindu epics demonstrate the significance of Mahadeviyakka placing herself in the plantain grove. However, the plantain grove may also be interpreted as a more specifically medieval Shaiva allusion. In a footnote for this vacana, Ramunjan writes, “The plantain grove was the abode of Gorakhnatha, the master-magician or Siddha.”¹⁵⁶ Gorakhnatha, also referred to as Gorakhnath, lived during the eleventh century and is commonly considered to be the founder of the Nath sect of Shaivism and Hatha Yoga.¹⁵⁷ The famous story which associates Gorakhnath with the plantain grove raises fascinating questions about

¹⁵⁶ Ramanujan, *Speaking of Śiva*, 194.

¹⁵⁷ ‘Gorakhnath | Hindu Yogi | Britannica’, accessed 28 April 2023, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Gorakhnath-Hindu-yogi>.

Mahadeviyakka's use of this reference and how she may be subverting patriarchal understandings of women in religious space.

In his book "Hanuman's Tale: The Messages of a Divine Monkey," Philip Lutgendorf points out how Nath yogis adapted the story of the plantain grove for their own purposes.¹⁵⁸ Lutgendorf points out the most direct association between Gorakhnath and the plantain grove which originated in, "the tales of the yogic master Matsyendranath," the guru of Gorakhnath who he must rescue from the plantain grove. In the story, "the perilous realm from which Gorakhnath retrieves his master is known as Kadali Vana or Kadali Rayja (the plantain forest or kingdom), a place commonly associated with immortality (including that of Hanuman), but here a fatal paradise of sixteen thousand women whose shapely thighs resemble plantain trunks."¹⁵⁹ This association with women and fatality follows the misogyny of the Nath sect which practiced semen retention and found women to be generally associated with seduction, attachment, and sexual depletion. Elsewhere, Lutgendorf describes the kadali-vana further, stating, "especially among the misogynistic Nath yogis, the Kadali Van was a place of temptation, identified with... the Shakta 'kingdom of women.'"¹⁶⁰

Taking into account this gendered interpretation of the plantain grove, Mahadeviyakka placing herself within it takes on a wildly different meaning. She radically reframes the derogatory notion of the "kingdom of women" by describing it as "the Jasmine Lord's favorite hill." By placing herself amongst the plantain grove in this way she further emphasizes how women are not inherently agents of seduction, imagining herself more like Hanuman resting in the field than one of the sixteen thousand women who trap Matsyendranath in it. Associating

¹⁵⁸ Philip Lutgendorf, *Hanuman's Tale: The Messages of a Divine Monkey* (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

¹⁵⁹ Lutgendorf, *Hanuman's Tale*, 434.

¹⁶⁰ Lutgendorf, *Hanuman's Tale*, 282.

herself with the ancient epics of Hinduism, rather than the misogynistic medieval variations which had emerged less than a century before Mahadeviyakka's time, she invokes a more supreme authority which inserts herself into the landscape of Hinduism. Additionally, the fact that Gorakhnath is considered the primary guru of the Nath sect, as well as the story of him in the plantain grove centering around his relationship with his own guru, demonstrates how, in this vacana, Mahadeviyakka has transcended any need for a guru. This vacana has been interpreted as describing Srishaila, the holy mountain where legend says she reached complete, fully embodied union with Shiva. As such, this vacana depicts Mahadeviyakka becoming her *own* guru and reaching enlightenment without any need for ritual initiation or another guru to lead her there. In this way, Mahadeviyakka powerfully establishes her own religious autonomy, inserts herself into the epic tradition, and subverts the medieval understanding of women as forces of temptation.

Markedly different in her approach to ritual from any of the mystics discussed thus far is Lalla. As she never lived in a community of people or entered one religious sect, there is no actual ritual authority for Lalla to reject or rituals for her to be excluded from. Despite this, ritual comes up frequently in the vakhs of Lalla as something which she vehemently disagrees with and sees as completely irrelevant towards one's relationship with Shiva. This follows the larger context of Kashmiri Shaivism which, while varying extremely based on group or sect, frequently practiced ritual forms of offerings, bathing, and intercourse¹⁶¹ Having no access to a sacred space in which to perform these rituals, as well as having seemingly no interest in them, Lalla rails against ritual forms of worship and invokes her own remarkable relationship with Shiva as evidence for the pointlessness of ritual.

This deeply anti-ritual and self assured attitude comes through very clearly in the Lalla-Vakyani. She suggests that any kind of ritual offering made to Shiva reflects a fundamental

¹⁶¹ Dyczkowski, *The Doctrine of Vibration*, 13.

misunderstanding of Shiva on the part of the devotee practicing the ritual and highlights her superior understanding which finds no need for these rituals. By demonstrating her own enlightened mind which allows her to find Shiva in everything, she suggests that those taking part in rituals are not as spiritually attuned as she is. Lalla makes no attempts to hide this perspective, with one vakh translated by Hoskote reading:

Fool, you won't find your way out by praying from a book.
The perfume on your carcass won't give you a clue.
Focus on the Self.
That's the best advice you can get.¹⁶²

Lalla frequently calls ritual practitioners fools, demonstrating the actively negative way she understands ritual to shape the religious experience. By venerating a focus on the self, something which Lalla is able to do more easily than most as she lived entirely alone in the forest, she assigns herself great power and superiority over communities of men who rely on their guru or others to guide them toward Shiva. This notion of ritual as impossible for Lalla due to the universal nature of Shiva is most clearly articulated in a vakh translated by Hoskote which reads:

You are sky and earth,
day, wind-breath, night.
You are grain, sandal paste, flowers, water.
Substance of my offering, You who are All,
what shall I offer You? ¹⁶³

As demonstrated by this vakh, Lalla finds the items commonly offered for ritual worship (grain, sandal paste, flowers) unfit for offering to Shiva who is found in the very “substance of” any offering made to him. Her final question is a rhetorical one, as the surrounding vakhs suggest the only thing Lalla wishes to offer to Shiva is herself.

Additionally, Lalla presents herself as a teacher, writer, and generally wise individual more than any other woman examined in this project. She frequently does this by presenting her

¹⁶² Hoskote and Laldyada, *I, Lalla*, 105.

¹⁶³ Hoskote and Laldyada, *I, Lalla*, 126.

own words as true ritual instruction or suggesting her writing is like scripture. Perhaps this is due to the complete lack of a male authority in Lalla's life which allowed her to place complete faith in herself and feel no shame in communicating this sense of assurance. While other women examined thus far have had to find loopholes or covert methods in order to take on a modified version of preacher or guru, Lalla does this directly, finding her own remarkable experiences of union with Shiva all the proof she needs of her eligibility for religious authority. Her entire basis for being able to act as an authority on ritual comes from her veneration of the instinctual and internal processes of the body which are what truly allows one to find Shiva, demonstrating the semiotic way in which she derives agency and which connects her to the less outspoken women of this project who also find the basis for their experience of God in the instinctual.

Lalla's radically powerful view of herself as a religious individual comes through in a number of her vakhs. In a vakh translated by Hoskote, she writes:

Whatever my hands did was worship,
 whatever my tongue shaped was prayer.
 That was Shiva's secret teaching:
 I wore it and it became my skin.¹⁶⁴

The Grierson translation of the same vakh assigns her with even more religious knowledge:

Whate'er work I did, that was worship
 Whate'er I uttered with my tongue, that was a mystic formula
 This recognition, and this alone, became one with my body.
 That this alone is the essence of the scriptures of the Supreme Shiva¹⁶⁵

In this vakh Lalla seems to describe the exact opposite of ritual. As J.Z Smith states in "The Bare Facts of Ritual," "ritual represents the creation of a controlled environment."¹⁶⁶ What Lalla describes here is an utter lack of control removed from any specific environment. Rather than restraining herself or controlling her behavior in any specific way, Lalla simply lives and finds

¹⁶⁴ Hoskote and Laldyada, *I, Lalla*, 128.

¹⁶⁵ Laldyada and Grierson, *Lalla-Vakyani or the Wise Sayings of Lal-Ded - A Mystic Poetess of Ancient Kashmir*, 77.

¹⁶⁶ Smith, 'The Bare Facts of Ritual', 124.

that Shiva naturally arises in her body's work and mind's behavior. The total lack of asceticism or cruelty towards the body in her writing further demonstrates how Lalla had virtually no religious practices outside of the naturally meditative and self-reflective way she lived her life. Despite this, she reached a level of enlightenment which other devotees could hardly imagine, as indicated by the legendary status she reached soon after her death. Similar to Mechthild, she is granted religious authority by others precisely due to her lack of ritual or scriptural knowledge and the fact that she experienced union with Shiva in spite of this, something made only more remarkable by the fact that she is a woman. The inexplicable nature of Lalla's attainment of enlightenment without any guru or ritual demonstrates what she already knows and communicates in this vakh: she is an extraordinarily adept devotee who experiences union with Shiva on a much higher level than most people. She emphasizes this in her vakhs as a way of demonstrating the irrelevance of ritual and gurus when it comes to the worship of Shiva, using herself as evidence of what happens when one treats the work of their body as ritual and the outpourings of their mind as scripture. By doing this, Lalla is able to condense "the essence of the scriptures of the Supreme Shiva" into the experience of her own body and mind.

Lalla further establishes herself as a master of her own spirituality in vakhs which refer to herself and her own writing as worthy of study. For instance, in one vakh translated by Hoskote she writes:

Master, leave these palm leaves and birch barks
to parrots who recite the name of God in a cage.
Good luck, I say, to those who think they've read the scriptures.
The greatest scripture is the one that's playing in my head.¹⁶⁷

Again, Lalla demonstrates her utter distaste for traditional ritual worship which she sees as inherently restrictive and limiting, referring to those who practice ritual chanting in a community

¹⁶⁷ Hoskote and Laldyada, *I, Lalla*, 191

as parrots, “in a cage.” This line provides insight into the mind of Lalla and the culture which surrounded her, suggesting that she saw the restrictions that may have been placed on her if she practiced with one group or guru as deeply inhibiting the direct, unmediated relationship with Shiva which she sought after. While a place in these communities might have allowed Lalla more access to traditional religious literature or wisdom, she emphasizes that she has no need for this in the final line of this vakh: “The greatest scripture is the one that’s playing in my head.” This line invokes many of the ideas present in the semiotic, as the great scripture she speaks of cannot be fully articulated through language because it is “playing” in her head. Despite this, she still claims religious authority through the scripture in her mind, as the authority of this scripture cannot be called into question if it cannot be comprehended by others. As such, her audience must trust in the internal narrative of Lalla and cling to the bits of insight into this inner world which she provides through her succinct vakhs.

The following vakh, translated by Hoskote, demonstrates how Lalla’s vakhs allowed her to act as a guru, despite a lack of any actual ritual instruction or ability to fully articulate the scripture of her mind.

Wear the robe of wisdom,
brand Lalla’s words on your heart,
lose yourself in the soul’s light,
you too shall be free.¹⁶⁸

This vakh clearly demonstrates how, whether consciously or not, Lalla has raised herself to the status of a guru. The Grierson translation holds on to this quality as well, translating the second line as, “Brand thou on thy heart the verses that Lalla spake.” In doing this, Lalla completely rejects typical notions of what a spiritual teacher should look and act like. While many of Lalla’s vakhs focus on her distaste for the world and the people in it, she clearly wants her words to be

¹⁶⁸ Hoskote and Laldyada, *I, Lalla*, 206.

heard, as is most directly indicated by this vakh. More than this, she wants others to find Shiva through her words, as she states, “you too shall be free.” Rather than finding covert ways to preach to others as a woman, Lalla clearly considered all of her outpourings to be a teaching which others should follow and, as such, demanded to be taken seriously in her vakhs. However, she acknowledges that there is an aspect to her way of finding Shiva which cannot be fully explained in words and which her audience must find on their own. Her instruction to “lose yourself in the soul’s light,” reflects the expansive way in which Lalla understands union with Shiva to take place. Similar to Lalla’s vakh about mud discussed earlier, she associates herself and her spirituality with that which is formless and unbound and, by extension, feminine. Her assertion that her audience will be “free” if they follow the course she has laid out for them further demonstrates this, demonstrating the high value Lalla places in the freedom to exist in a non-fixed and nebulous manner.

Rather than seeking contentment or peace through Shiva, Lalla is seeking freedom. To a certain extent, all of the women in this project are. However, Lalla is the only one who was able to operate entirely outside of any religious authority and attain absolute and unrestricted freedom of speech and movement. At the same time, this gave her no rituals or scripture which she could base her religious experience in. Thus, Lalla became her own spiritual authority. This, by extension, allowed her to act as a spiritual authority to others who received her vakhs, deeply subverting the assumption that women could not be gurus. Rather than internalizing ritual, Lalla transcends ritual. Through the radical faith she had in her own abilities, Lalla gave herself unprecedented power for a woman to speak about God by emphasizing the inexplicable way she was able to experience union with Shiva while removed from any traditional religious practice.

Part Three: Veneration of Madness

In this final section, I look at the trait which these women share profoundly across all their differences in location, time period, and content of writing. All four of the women examined in this project are unified by their conception of themselves as mad or crazed as a result of their interactions with God. The overwhelming way in which they experience God in body and mind makes them mad, even by medieval religious standards. At the same time, these women all emphasize the way in which they are fundamentally unfit for non-religious life with all of them besides Hildegard declaring the only husband they will ever have is God. Stuck between two worlds, with the world of marriage actively taking away their physical autonomy and the world of religion actively denying women the ability to speak in any original way about God, these women still chose religious life. To make this choice and abandon all patriarchal understandings of what a woman should want made them, by medieval standards, completely mad. Rather than attempting to hide this, they place this sense of madness or inexplicability at the center of their narratives, asserting that the fact that they are so consumed by God in body and mind is indicative of their powerful connection to God. This comes through in their language in the way they place contradictions at the forefront and leave descriptions of events vague, focusing more on the sensations which these events make them feel.

In Christianity, the mystics focus primarily on their unlearned state which makes it so miraculous that God has chosen to speak through them. By extension, they also highlight the relief these interactions provide from the madness they feel when separated from God, as their unlearned status makes them unable to experience God in any form other than direct communication. In Hinduism, on the other hand, these women focus on the madness of their condition as proof of their immense knowledge and connection with Shiva which plagues them

in body and makes them unable to fully communicate to others what they inherently understand on an innate level. Unlike the Christian mystics they do not present themselves as simple women inexplicably bestowed with visions from God, but unique, chosen women whose experiences of madness indicate how they are distinct from other devotees, regardless of gender, in the immediate way they are able to experience God. In both instances, however, these women have centralized madness in their own writing as a way of characterizing themselves as unfit for secular life, destined for union with God, and consumed by God in such a way that they cannot fully articulate through language.

This tension between the religious and social world and the way these women use the language of madness to navigate this tension is the clearest demonstration of their use of Kristeva's conception of the semiotic. Vijaya Ramaswamy points out the connection between madness, mysticism, and the semiotic in his book *Walking Naked: Women, Society, Spirituality in South India*. He writes, 'It is precisely the tension between these two [the semiotic and symbolic] that constitutes the language of spirituality and mysticism. This tension is perceived in a sharper manner in spiritual women writers since the tension born out of an urge to break free of the patriarchal structure and the inability to do so in absolute terms is grounded in social reality.'¹⁶⁹ When these women center this tension in their own writing, they manage to fuse the symbolic and semiotic, as they must use the existent language structure of the symbolic realm to articulate their thoughts, but "their vocabulary is dominated by the semiotic, the pre-Oedipal language of signs."¹⁷⁰ This manifests itself in language which centers around the body and the interior world, as demonstrated earlier, as well as a surrendering to their own perceived madness and

¹⁶⁹ Vijaya Ramaswamy, *Walking Naked: Women, Society, Spirituality in South India* (Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 1997), 164.

¹⁷⁰ Ramaswamy, *Walking Naked*, 182.

incomprehensibility. They highlight contradictions and impossibility in their writing and find power and exclusivity through this.

On one hand, these women are able to leave behind the symbolic realm of marriage and motherhood which inhibits them and find freedom in the semiotic realm of mystical religious experience. On the other hand, they center the semiotic in their own writing as a way of claiming an authority on God which men could not invoke in the same way, thus, allowing them to produce writing which would enter them into the symbolic world. By finding power and authority in the inexplicable nature of their religious experience, these women were able to freely live, create, and exist among God, while still producing works of writing which would place them in the symbolic world of language production which was typically restricted to men.

a. Hildegard and Mechthild

Both Hildegard and Mechthild describe their first reception of God and their reaction to this sudden intervention in extraordinary detail, demonstrating the significance they place on this first encounter. Hildegard describes hers at the outset of her book in her “Declaration” which acts as a kind of introduction to her life. She immediately emphasizes the entirely inactive role she played in receiving messages from God, writing:

In the forty-third year of my earthly course, as I was gazing with great fear and trembling attention at a heavenly vision, I saw a great splendor in which resounded a voice from Heaven, saying to me, ‘O fragile human, ashes of ashes, and filth of filth! Say and write what you see and hear. But since you are timid in speaking, and simple in expounding, and untaught in writing, speak and write these things not by a human mouth, and not by the understanding of human invention, and not by the requirements of human composition, but as you see and hear them on high in the heavenly places in the wonders of God.’¹⁷¹

In this opening to *Scivias*, Hildegard establishes some of the book’s most central and recurring themes. This can be seen in the way she describes herself, the “fragile human,” as “ashes of

¹⁷¹ Hildegard, *Scivias*, 59.

ashes, and filth of filth.” Associating herself with the lowest qualities of nature, Hildegard establishes that she is aware of how unfit she seemingly is to receive God’s messages. However, immediately following this description of her as lowly, God tells her she must “say and write what you see and hear.” Again, this direct power and communication with God is immediately juxtaposed with lowliness as God describes her as, “timid in speaking, and simple in expounding, and untaught in writing.” This emphasis on her simplicity, lack of education, and inability to speak publicly, coming immediately before hundreds of pages of extraordinarily detailed and innovative mysticism, demonstrates how Hildegard wishes to establish herself as a miraculous kind of prophet who receives her visions and language entirely through God.

Similarities between Hildegard and Moses come through in this line, as Moses similarly received divine instructions from God which he initially claimed he could not follow, describing himself as “slow of speech and slow of tongue.” (Exodus 4:10). Similar to Moses, God tells Hildegard to simply let him deliver his message through her, stating, “speak and write these things not by a human mouth.” Distinguishing her from Moses, who must deliver a direct message to Pharaoh through persuasive language, Hildegard is told that she must communicate the message of God, “not by the understanding of human invention, and not by the requirements of human composition, but as you see and hear them on high.” This description of language bears many similarities to Kristeva’s conception of semiotic language. As she is a direct messenger of God who does not believe herself to be capable of delivering this message, Hildegard tells her reader from the outset that her writing will not abide by the standards of ‘human invention [and] composition,’ essentially the standards of the symbolic order. By presenting herself as following in the prophetic tradition and stating that any incomprehensibility in her language comes from the direct order of God, Hildegard places the perception of women

as unlearned and simple in a radical new context, suggesting that this allows for God to speak through her in his most unfiltered form.

A sense of madness in addition to unlearnedness comes through in Hildegard's declaration when she describes how she initially refused this instruction from God, writing, "But I, though I saw and heard these things, refused to write for a long time through doubt and bad opinion and the diversity of human words, not with stubbornness but in the exercise of humility, until, laid low by the scourge of God, I fell upon a bed of sickness."¹⁷² Interestingly, Hildegard does not feel mad because of her connection or separation from God, as is the case with the other mystics, but when she attempts to deny his messages due to the "bad opinion" of others, as well as doubt in herself. However, it is also this illness which compels her to communicate God's messages, as she states, "then, compelled at last by many illnesses... I set my hand to writing." She continues, stating that while writing she was gifted by, "the deep profundity of scriptural exposition; and, raising myself from illness by the strength I received, I brought this work to a close— though just barely—in ten years."¹⁷³ As demonstrated by this selection, Hildegard can only find a reprieve from the illness which constantly plagued her, when in direct communication with God. The fact that Hildegard was able to receive both spiritual knowledge and a cessation to her illness through her connection with God gives her further credence in the eyes of the Church, as this connection provides her with a tangibly improved status in both mind and body. By highlighting her own mental and physical infirmity, she actually grants herself authority within the Church, as her writing acts as proof of God's ability to raise up the lowly.

There is one additional section of *Scivias* which highlights the sense of madness Hildegard felt before allowing herself to share her interactions with God with others. In one of

¹⁷² Hildegard, *Scivias*, 60.

¹⁷³ Hildegard, *Scivias*, 61.

the only first person narratives in *Scivias*, Hildegard describes herself as “a pilgrim” who is journeying “In the path of error.” (1.4§1). Describing a vision of herself in a godless desert where she is attacked, mocked, and tortured by various creatures, reflecting the crazed state she feels when separated from God, she calls out, “Oh, who will console me, since even my mother has abandoned me when I strayed from the path of salvation? Who will help me but God?” (1.4§1).¹⁷⁴ This demonstrates the direct correlation between madness and God which Hildegard found in her own life. Her emphasis on the mother also reflects curious semiotic implications, as she continues that she experienced some relief from her suffering when, “A most sweet fragrance touched my nostrils, like a gentle breath exhaled by my mother. Oh, what groans and tears I poured forth then, when I felt the presence of that small consolation! And in my joy I uttered such cries and shed such tears that the very mountain in whose cave I had hidden myself was shaken by it.” (1.4§1).¹⁷⁵

The way Hildegard merges the idea of maternal and God-like consolation and comfort in this section recalls Kristeva’s association of the semiotic with the womb, represented by the semiotic chora. Hildegard parallels her own need for comfort and union with God with the comfort and union one experiences while in the womb of their mother. Invoking this idea, Hildegard emphasizes the way in which she truly needs God in her life the way other people might need their mother, further demonstrating her “madness” and why it is necessary for her to share the messages she receives from God. As Hildegard was ostensibly adopted by God as a tithe and abandoned by her real mother, this section also reflects the psychology of Hildegard who has only ever known family through her experiences of religion and may reconcile her lack of a mother with her ability to commune and take comfort in God.

¹⁷⁴ Hildegard, *Scivias*, 60.

¹⁷⁵ Hildegard, *Scivias*, 111.

These two parallel understandings of God and mother come together in the following section of this chapter of *Scivias* where Hildegard states she hears her mother's voice telling her, "O daughter, run! For the Most Powerful Giver whom no one can resist has given you wings to fly with. Therefore fly swiftly over all these obstacles!" And I, comforted with great consolation, took wing and passed swiftly over all those poisonous and deadly things." (1.4§2).¹⁷⁶ Imagining a mother supportive of her religious vocation, Hildegard combines the comforting nature of the mother with the all-powerful and authoritative nature of God. Her mother tells her to run because "the Most Powerful Giver whom no one can resist," emphasizing Hildegard's inability to refuse the visions she receives, has given her "wings to fly with." Through this, Hildegard's mother consoles her with the authoritative order Hildegard has received from God. Imagining her visionary gift as "wings to fly with" over her obstacles beautifully articulates the way Hildegard finds freedom in body and mind through her ability to commune with God. As demonstrated by these selections, Hildegard venerated her own unlearnedness as it acted as proof of God's tangible connection to her, as well as highlighting the madness and sickness in body which she experiences when she attempts to deny this connection. By presenting herself as simple in mind and weak in body, she renders her own elevation through God even more miraculous, granting her a kind of power within the Church which men could not claim as readily.

Mechthild has perhaps the lowest view of herself of the four mystics being examined in this project. Frequently describing herself as "evil," "faithless," and like a "dog," Mechthild almost never venerates any aspect of herself, only referring to herself in a positive way when taking on the voice of God. When God describes Mechthild, however, he finds her to be the exact opposite, describing her as his "beloved" and praising her most devoted worship of Him. Similar to Hildegard, Mechthild is raised up by God through his love of her. Making her distinct

¹⁷⁶ Hildegard, *Scivias*, 112.

from Hildegard is the emphasis Mechthild places on the hatred she feels toward herself despite God's love for her. This contradictory understanding of the self lies at the heart of Mechthild's mysticism, as she is constantly seeking reassurance from God, emphasizing her lack of involvement in producing this writing, and describing herself in varying states of madness and depression whenever she is separated from God. This understanding of herself in relation to God may seem problematic in the way it reinforces the idea of women as too emotional and crazed to speak or write for the public and their need for a male authority to validate them. However, by presenting her connection with God as like a loving relationship where one is too blind to see the love the other feels for them, she elevates herself to the status of a bride of God, a status which men in the church would not have the ability to claim. Furthermore, the extreme lowliness and simplicity Mechthild assigns herself also allows her to write as one who is unfamiliar with worldly desires and evil, thus making her more fit for communicating the messages of God than men who must battle with their own temptations and desire for worldly life.

This latter point can be seen in Mechthild's description of God's first message to her. Similar to Hildegard, Mechthild also goes into great detail when describing her reception of a message from God telling her that she must share his message through writing. This description doesn't come until the fourth part of *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, where she writes:

All my life before I began this book and before a single word of it came from God into my soul, I was the simplest creature who ever appeared in the spiritual life. Of the devil's wickedness I knew nothing, nor of the evil of the world, and the falseness of so-called spiritual people, I had no idea. Now I must glorify God through speech as well as through the writing of this book.¹⁷⁷

This description of herself as "the simplest creature who ever appeared in the spiritual life," has already been discussed earlier. However, in the context of this discussion of unlearnedness as conducive to one's experience of God, the line takes on a very different meaning. Not only is

¹⁷⁷ Mechthild (of Magdeburg), *The Revelations of Mechthild of Magdeburg (1210-1297)*, 94.

Mechthild simple, she is *the* simplest person to *ever* take part in spiritual life. By designating herself as the lowest of the low, she makes it even more remarkable when she is raised by God and able to witness the heights of heaven through her visions. This is further supported by her assertion that, due to her simplicity, she knew nothing of the devil, evil, or spiritual falseness. This last concept in particular seems to respond directly to male authorities who did not approve of the beguine women and who might claim that Mechthild is practicing spiritual falseness. Mechthild, although quick to speak of herself negatively, never gives into this understanding of herself and instead frequently calls out the false spirituality of those “so-called spiritual people,” while highlighting the purity and simplicity of her own spirituality.

Mechthild continues this theme in the following sentences, writing, “I, unworthy sinner, was greeted so overpoweringly by the Holy Spirit in my twelfth year when I was alone, that I could no longer have given way to any serious daily sin. The loving greeting came every day and caused me both love and sorrow.” The deeply simplistic and internal way Mechthild receives God is demonstrated to be a force of good here. While she first describes herself as an “unworthy sinner,” she states that after encountering God she “could no longer” commit any serious sins. This demonstrates how her sensitivity and emotional nature actually allow her to follow God’s messages in the most immediate way possible. Additionally, the fact that she describes these interactions with God as causing her “both love and sorrow,” indicates the intensity of these encounters, granting her further authority to speak about God and have this message be received by others.

Finally, the conclusion to this section of *The Flowing Light of the Godhead* ends with this deeply encouraging message from God to Mechthild who is doubting why she should be the messenger of God’s words. She writes:

‘Ah! Merciful God! what hast thou seen in me? Thou knowest I am a fool, a sinner, a poor creature both in body and soul. Such things as these thou should have shown to the wise. then wouldst thou have been praised!’ But our Lord was angry against my poor self. ‘Tell me,’ he said, ‘aren't thou truly mine?’ ‘Yea, Lord! that I do ask of thee, that I be truly thine!’ ‘Can I then not do with thee what I will?... Thou shalt follow me and trust me in all things. Thou shalt have a long illness and I will tend thee myself. and all that is necessary to the body and soul I will give thee!’¹⁷⁸

In this passage, Mechthild highlights the intimate relationship she has with God which has allowed her to speak despite her belief that she is “a fool, a sinner, a poor creature both in body and soul.” This self-loathing response angers God who tells Mechthild that she belongs to him and, thus, must follow and trust him in all things. He additionally tells her that she will experience a long illness, reflecting the all consuming and maddening nature of her relationship with God, but also telling her that he will tend to her through this illness, reflecting the loving and mutual aspect of her relationship with God. By including this description of God referring to Mechthild as “truly” his, Mechthild establishes that, whether she likes it or not, she has been claimed by God and must deliver his message in spite of her perceived weakness and in spite of any suffering it might cause her. The fact that she persists in communicating his messages despite her own self-hatred and physical weakness acts as proof of the necessity of these messages and the inescapable nature of God’s plan for Mechthild. Mechthild’s own complex feelings toward the role she has been assigned by God in relation to her gender is most clearly articulated in the final lines of this section where she writes, “Then he commanded me to do that for which I often weep for shame when my unworthiness stands clear before my eyes, namely, that I, a poor despised little woman, should write this book out of God’s heart and mouth. This book therefore has come lovingly from God and is not drawn from human senses.”¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁸ Mechthild (of Magdeburg), *The Revelations of Mechthild of Magdeburg (1210-1297)*, 98.

¹⁷⁹ Mechthild (of Magdeburg), *The Revelations of Mechthild of Magdeburg (1210-1297)*, 98.

Mechthild continues wrestling with her own ability to deliver God's message in shorter lines coming at the end of her visions. For instance, in the second part of the book following discussion of a vision she had of the wounds of Christ and the Day of Judgment, she writes, "Here German fails me and Latin I know not. If anything good is in this writing, it is not owing to me! But no dog ever was so bad, that if its Master enticed it with a piece of bread, it would not come gladly."¹⁸⁰ This first line highlights how Mechthild's lack of linguistic knowledge forces her to write in a semiotic way as she cannot fully articulate her experiences of God with her limited knowledge of language. Thus, she instructs her audience to take what they can get from her writing and assume that any good part of it is proof of this internal connection she has with God which she does not have the means to communicate in the way she would like. Her final line comparing herself to a dog accomplishes two purposes. On one hand, it follows her general description of herself as lowly, thus making her more eager to receive the word of God, similar to how a dog in their simplicity will not question the food they are given, but take it with gladness and without question. On the other hand, the line associates her with an authority within the church, as the Dominican Order, flourishing at this time, was often referred to as the *Domini Cane*, dogs of the lord, suggesting the possibility of a more positive interpretation of being a dog in relation to God which highlights the dogs loyalty and devotion to its master. In either case, Mechthild venerates her own simplicity and love of God by comparing herself to a dog.

Passages which reflect Mechthild's states of depression and madness when separated from God demonstrate how imperative her relationship with God is and how it consumes her entirely, in both body and mind. Through this, Mechthild demonstrates a level of commitment to

¹⁸⁰ Mechthild (of Magdeburg), *The Revelations of Mechthild of Magdeburg (1210-1297)*, 32. Mechthild alludes to Mark 7:24-30 in this passage. Notably, in Mark 7:24-30, it is a woman who tells Jesus, "even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." This response demonstrates such spiritual attunement that the woman's daughter is then freed from a demon.

Christ which men could only attempt to replicate through self-restrictive and ascetic practices, as many did throughout the middle ages. Rather than looking to the outside world to induce a state of madness which might bring one closer to God, Mechthild is driven mad by the world inside her own mind. The extent to which Mechthild is mad with love of God grants her an extraordinary power within the Church, as it reflects a kind of emotional sensitivity and romantic passion which men could not claim as easily. This can be seen in passages such as one from the second part of the book in which Mechthild is told by the Holy Spirit to prepare herself for the return of God, telling her “Thy Lover comes!” She responds to this seemingly good news with extreme doubt, stating:

Would that it were ever so!
 I am so evil and so faithless
 That I can find no peace of mind
 Apart from my Love.
 The moment it seems that I cool
 But a little from love of Him,
 Then am I in deep distress,
 And can do nothing but seek for Him lamenting.¹⁸¹

Mechthild’s description of herself as evil and faithless highlights how radically transformed she is by her encounters with God. This makes her encounters with God and visions of him even more radical, as she does nothing to warrant these interactions, yet is able to experience perfect contentment through them, in contrast with the “deep distress” and lack of “peace of mind” which she describes in this poem.

Similar to Hildegard, Mechthild experiences tangible changes in her state of mind through her encounters with God. However, while Hildegard only feels mad or sick when she attempts to deny God, Mechthild feels crazed whenever not in direct communication with God, as her intense self-hatred and doubt causes her to believe she has been abandoned forever,

¹⁸¹ Mechthild (of Magdeburg), *The Revelations of Mechthild of Magdeburg (1210-1297)*, 29

driving her mad. The final line, however, suggests that there is a kind of power in her madness. Stating that these periods of madness leave her unable to do anything “but seek for him lamenting,” she suggests that her love is so powerful that, even when she feels abandoned by God, her life is still consumed by searching for him. This constant searching reflects a deeply dedicated spiritual mindset and a level of devotion which others could only aspire toward.

Finally, in a passage which reflects the constant way Mechthild lives in dedication to God, she manages to claim spiritual power directly due to her lowly status and intimate relationship with God. In a passage from the second part of the book in which she is asked whether she would rather live as an angel in heaven or as a human with a body. She responds:

Yet I, least of all souls,
Take Him in my hand
Eat Him and drink Him
And do with Him what I will!--
That can never happen to the angels
However high they may be above me;
And His Godhead is never so unattainable to me
That I am not ceaselessly aware of Him
In all my being!
Thus my love of Him can never cool.¹⁸²

Through this passage, Mechthild finally seems to find power in her lowliness, commenting on how remarkable it is that she, the “least of all souls,” may consume Christ so fully, literally holding him, eating him, and drinking him. This recalls Mechthild’s earlier vision of a mutual communion with the sacrificial lamb and connects to the bodily way all four mystics in this project understand their relationship with God. This is further emphasized by her assertion that she is constantly aware of Christ in all of her being. She asserts that her human nature and frailty are not a hindrance to her spiritual experience, but precisely what allows her to love him so fully. As she is constantly longing, her “love of Him can never cool.” By presenting herself as wholly

¹⁸² Mechthild (of Magdeburg), *The Revelations of Mechthild of Magdeburg (1210-1297)*, 48.

dedicated to and consumed by her love of God, despite her own weakness and ignorance, Mechthild establishes herself as a powerful messenger of God who has no choice but to communicate the messages she receives, thus granting her the autonomy to speak about God.

b. Mahadeviyakka and Lalla

Rather than highlighting their own simplicity and unlearnedness, Mahadeviyakka and Lalla showcase the way they have become frenzied and mad with love for Shiva. Similar to Mechthild, they both describe being in states of unrest when they feel separation from their God. However, they do not understand this sense of unrest as making them weak but, rather, as pushing them closer to Shiva, as well as demonstrating the true devotion they have for him. Additionally, they both assert the way in which the outside world is impossible for them to live in, as they do not fit the normative standards of women in their culture and society. They take this as an indication that they are destined for religious life and have been taken out of normal society due to their unique ability to experience union with Shiva. In both cases, these women's writing are still imbued with the semiotic, as they emphasize the bodily way madness consumes them and often use contradictory or indecipherable language to describe their love-mad states.

Mahadeviyakka, in particular, highlights the way separation from Shiva actually accelerates her love and desire for him, making her devotional practice towards him even more fully embodied and removing any desire she ever had for the outside world. This can be seen in a vacana translated by A.K Ramanujan which reads:

Four parts of the day
I grieve for you.
Four parts of the night
I'm mad for you.
I lie lost
sick for you, night and day,
O lord white as jasmine.
Since your love

was planted,
I've forgotten hunger,
thirst, and sleep.¹⁸³

As demonstrated by this vacana, Mahadeviyakka's entire day and night is consumed by Shiva. She spends her days grieving for him and her nights "mad for" him. She is rendered sick and must "lie lost" for as long as she is without him. However, she qualifies all of these descriptions of negative effects of her devotion to Shiva through the deeply powerful final line of this vacana. Writing, "Since your love was planted, I've forgotten hunger, thirst, and sleep," demonstrates two qualities which assign Mahadeviyakka with profound spiritual power. First, she states that Shiva's love was "planted" in her. In a more indirect way than Hildegard and Mechthild, Mahadeviyakka asserts her lack of involvement in receiving messages from God, suggesting that Shiva placed his love in her through no action of her own. As a result of this love being planted, Mahadeviyakka must experience the madness and sickness she describes in the first sentence of this vacana. However, it is also this love being planted which has allowed her to forget "hunger, thirst, and sleep." By saying this, Mahadeviyakka suggests that Shiva's love for her has given her special powers beyond that of a normal human. This demonstrates her uniqueness which Mahadeviyakka seeks to emphasize in her vacanas and which grants her the spiritual authority to act and live in an independent fashion.

Other vacanas of Mahadeviyakka illustrate a different kind of madness: the madness she feels as a result of her complete disillusionment with the outside world of culture and society. She repeatedly describes how she is not meant for the social world and, thus, can only live in the way she describes in the previous vacana, constantly seeking Shiva. While this also induces a state of madness in her, this has been demonstrated to be a positive form of unrest which increases her desire for Shiva and allows him to consume her more fully, granting her certain

¹⁸³ Ramanujan, *Speaking of Śiva*, 123.

powers in the process. Mahadeviyakka's inability to live in the social world comes through plainly in this vacana translated by A.K Ramanujan which reads:

Husband inside,
lover outside.
I can't manage them both.
This world
and that other,
cannot manage them both.
O lord white as jasmine
I cannot hold in one hand
both the round nut
and the long bow.¹⁸⁴

Mahadeviyakka immediately establishes her understanding of spiritual and social life as two completely different worlds which she cannot balance in this vacana. She tells us that she cannot “manage them both,” demonstrating how she considers herself deeply unfit for any sort of secular life. Considering this alongside the fact that the majority of female devotees who lived at the same time as Mahadeviyakka at Kalyana were married or had jobs outside of their devotional life suggests that Mahadeviyakka is attempting to explain why she cannot live in the way many other women do.¹⁸⁵ While others are able to balance their secular and religious life, Mahadeviyakka is too consumed with love for Shiva to do this. This is demonstrated by her designation of men in the social world as husband, but describing Shiva as lover. While husband has stronger implications in the social and legal world, Mahadeviyakka exists entirely outside of this world and, as such, identifies Shiva solely as her lover.

She further illustrates her inability to balance these two worlds in the final line of this vacana, stating, “I cannot hold in one hand both the round nut and the long bow.” In this strange comparison, Mahadeviyakka draws out the opposite nature of the two worlds she is faced with

¹⁸⁴ Ramanujan, *Speaking of Śiva*, 126.

¹⁸⁵ Vijaya Ramaswamy, *Walking Naked: Women, Society, Spirituality in South India* (Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 1997), 157–61.

and the overwhelming superiority of the latter option. The first option, the round nut, is described in the footnotes to this vacana as “a large unripe hard-shelled nut,” and is associated with the social world, as the pattern of the vacana has established thus far. While the round nut is large, it is also unripe and hard to break into, reflecting Mahadeviyakka’s understanding of the social world as vast, but irrelevant to her who cannot fully enter into it. By contrast, spiritual life is associated with “the long bow.” Given the significance of archery in Hinduism, particularly in the epics which Mahadeviyakka has already expressed a preoccupation with, this line demonstrates how Mahadeviyakka understands her choice to abandon the social world and give herself fully to spiritual life as granting her freedom and protection which she could not have otherwise.

Mahadeviyakka further accentuates how she is unfit for this world in a vacana which describes the reactions she has received from men along her journey. The vacana reads:

O brothers, why do you talk
to this woman,
hair loose,
face withered,
body shrunk?
O fathers, why do you bother
with this woman?
She has no strength of limb,
has lost the world,
lost power of will,
turned devotee,
she has lain down with the Lord, white as jasmine,
and has lost caste.¹⁸⁶

Through this vacana, Mahadeviyakka both highlights the way her love for Shiva has consumed her both in body and mind, as well as shaming men who cast judgment towards her due to the way this love has manifested itself in her. She first describes herself in a state of physical unrest, “hair loose, face withered, body shrunk.” She then describes herself in a state of mental

¹⁸⁶ Ramanujan, *Speaking of Śiva*, 135.

weakness, having lost the world and her will power through her choice to “turn devotee.” This vacana demonstrates the deeply radical way Mahadeviyakka was choosing to live her life and the judgment and potential violence she encountered because of her choices. She calls the men who harass her brothers and fathers, reflecting the universality of men’s negative reaction to her, as well as raising interesting questions of whether this happened among the Virashaivas at Kalyana who referred to her as sister, “akka.” She finally asserts that whatever these men say or do to bother her has no effect on her, as she has “lain down with the Lord,” reflecting the embodied and intimate connection she has with Shiva, “and has lost caste,” again demonstrating the remarkable power which is granted to her by the all-consuming nature of her relationship with Shiva.

Finally, in a similar way to Hildegard, Mahadeviyakka articulates her madness induced by God through a vacana involving her mother. While Hildegard reconciles the idea of her mother and God in visions which grant her comfort from unrest and outside assaults, Mahadeviyakka rejects her mother entirely, finding everything she needs in Shiva. In a vacana imagining, or perhaps recalling, a conversation with her mother, Mahadeviyakka writes:

O mother, you must be crazy,
 I fell for my lord
 white as jasmine,
 I’ve given in utterly.
 Go, go, I’ll have nothing
 of your mother-and-daughter stuff
 You go now.¹⁸⁷

Subverting the typical understanding of madness, Mahadeviyakka begins by calling her mother crazy for attempting to bring her back to social life. As always, Mahadeviyakka emphasizes the overwhelming nature of her experience of Shiva which she cannot fully articulate through words, simply stating “I’ve given in utterly,” further reflecting the way in which she has resigned herself

¹⁸⁷ Ramanujan, *Speaking of Śiva*, 125.

to the love Shiva has planted in her. She tells her mother to leave as she wants nothing of her “mother-and-daughter stuff.” Rejecting the world of the mother, what Lacan imagined as entering one into the symbolic world of the father, Mahadeviyakka instead chooses the otherworldly realm in which she is elevated beyond caste and can experience union with Shiva. Mahadeviyakka’s rejection of the most fundamental human relationship further establishes her as unique amongst all humans and, thus, a fitting choice for Shiva to communicate his message through. This idea is most fully communicated in another *vacana* which mentions the mother and which concludes. “O lord white as jasmine/ your love’s blade stabbed/ and broken in my flesh,/ I writhe./ O mothers/ how can you know me?”¹⁸⁸ Presenting herself again as deeply consumed by Shiva who has chosen her to place his love in, violently and bodily imagined as a blade lodged in her flesh, she asserts that she can never be fully understood by others who have chosen social life and submits herself to a life alone with Shiva, content with the fact that others may never fully understand her.

Similar to Mahadeviyakka, Lalla understands the social realm and the people that inhabit it to be truly mad and understands complete union with Shiva as the only place in which true sanity and perfection can be located. Although this union induces a similar state of madness in her, she finds this to be a positive kind of madness which accelerates the immediacy of her relationship with Shiva. She takes this notion even further than Mahadeviyakka does, rejecting not just the social realm, but the earthly world entirely for the spiritual realm in which she can experience the unmediated union which she desires. In doing this, she establishes that she is truly unfit for this world and has no one to turn to but Shiva. As such, her *vakhs* carry an absolute necessity and passion in them which granted her a kind of religious authority and allowed her to insert herself into the landscape of recorded religion.

¹⁸⁸ Ramanujan, *Speaking of Śiva*, 138.

Lalla first establishes the disillusioned attitude she has toward the earthly world in a vakh which describes her memories from life when she lived among society. Translated by Hoskote, she writes:

I saw a sage starving to death, a leaf floating to earth
on a winter breeze. I saw a fool beating his cook.
And now I'm waiting for someone to cut
the love-cord that keeps me tied to this crazy world.¹⁸⁹

In this vakh, Lalla demonstrates her sensitivity to injustice in this world which has pushed her to only want to live in union with Shiva. She describes witnessing a sage starving to death and places this next to a leaf falling due to the winter wind, demonstrating the inescapability of this earthly realm in which everything, from the wisest sage to the simplest leaf, must die. She adds that she saw “a fool beating his cook,” indicating the complete disregard Lalla has for caste and the disgust she feels toward violence. In the face of a world which is rife with death, social inequality, and violence, Lalla asks for Shiva to “cut the love-cord,” again reflecting a bodily, perhaps umbilical, understanding of her relationship to the world around her, which keeps her tied “to this crazy world.” Her later vakhs indicate that, by placing all of her love and devotion in Shiva, she was eventually able to cut off any ties she had to the earthly world, living in a constant state of union with Shiva.

Lalla demonstrates this ability to cut off the earthly world and render it unable to affect her in vakhs describing the judgment she faces from others along her journey. This topic coming up in the poetry of both Lalla and Mahadeviyakka indicates the level of condemnation which both women must have faced as a result of walking naked and speaking about God despite the fact that they are separated by thousands of miles and hundreds of years. As such, they both find relief from this outside world which thinks of them as mad through their union with Shiva who

¹⁸⁹ Hoskote and Laldyada, *I, Lalla*, 96.

understands them as an extension of himself. Lalla describes this in a vakh, translated by Hoskote, which reads:

Let them hurl a thousand curses at me,
 pain finds no purchase in my heart.
 I belong to Shiva. Can a scatter of ashes
 ruin a mirror? It gleams.¹⁹⁰

Highlighting her inseparable connection with Shiva, Lalla describes how a thousand curses would be unable to impact her heart because it, along with the entirety of her being, belongs to Shiva. She describes herself as like a mirror of Shiva, granting herself a spiritual authority similar to the kind Mechthild invokes when imagining herself as experiencing the life of Jesus or taking part in mutual communion with the sacrificial lamb. As she is a mirror of Shiva, any insults or criticism of her has no impact on her in the same way human insults and criticism would have no effect on Shiva, the supreme deity and god of destruction. This inseparable connection between her and Shiva comes through even clearer in the Grierson translations which translates the second and third lines as, “if I be innately devoted to Śiva... disquiet will find no abode in my heart.”¹⁹¹ This focus on the innate quality of her connection with Shiva and the power she derives from this demonstrates how she uses semiotic language to derive religious authority, allowing her to “gleam” in the face of condemnation.

The semiotic can also be seen in Lalla’s writing in the way she showcases contradictions, impossibility, and, by extension, madness in her vawks. She makes no attempts to explain these contradictions, instead allowing her words to speak for themselves, suggesting to her audience that any inability to comprehend her writing is actually a reflection of their inability to comprehend Shiva in the instinctual way she does. In one vakh which highlights this, she writes:

I, Lalla, wore myself down searching for Him

¹⁹⁰ Hoskote and Laldyada, *I, Lalla*, 156.

¹⁹¹ Laldyada and Grierson, *Lalla-Vakyani or the Wise Sayings of Lal-Ded - A Mystic Poetess of Ancient Kashmir*, 40.

and found a strength after my strength had died.
 I came to His threshold but found the door bolted.
 I locked that door with my eyes and looked at Him.¹⁹²

First describing the worn down state that her spiritual experience has produced in her, she then explains that she was able to find strength “after my strength had died.” This demonstrates the special powers Lalla finds that she is granted by her union with Shiva, similar to Mahadeviyakka, allowing her the impossible ability to bring her strength back from the dead. This sense of union with Shiva as allowing her to transcend physical impossibility comes through even clearer in the next lines. She describes coming to the “threshold” of Shiva, a vague image which could take on a variety of meanings, but finding the door bolted shut. The final line of the vakh presents an utter contradiction, with Lalla telling her listener that she locked the already bolted shut door with her eyes and then “looked at Him.” Rather than explaining how she locked the door, how she was able to see “Him” through this locked door, or what he looked like, Lalla gives no answers except for her deeply ambiguous and confusing account of her own lived experience.

In this vakh, Lalla presents herself as capable of overcoming impossibility by locating Shiva within herself instead of looking for him in outside places. The door being bolted in the first place indicates that one will never find Shiva by searching for him in the world outside of oneself. The Grierson translation establishes this notion more clearly, translating the final line as, “And even in me, as I was, did longing for him become fixed; and there, where I was, I gazed upon Him.”¹⁹³ In this equally difficult to decipher line, Lalla describes going from a constant state of searching to a state of being “fixed.” By cultivating a fixed interior self which is constantly longing for Shiva, Lalla is able to transcend the bolted door keeping her from him not

¹⁹² Hoskote and Laldyada, *I, Lalla*, 156.

¹⁹³ Laldyada and Grierson, *Lalla-Vakyani or the Wise Sayings of Lal-Ded - A Mystic Poetess of Ancient Kashmir*, 67.

by opening it, but by staying exactly “there, where I was.” By looking inside herself, she is finally able to gaze “upon Him.” This further demonstrates the innate relationship she has with Shiva which she is unable to instruct others on how to replicate through language. Instead, her vague and contradictory language seems to suggest that this is an experience one can only understand having lived it, as she has. As such, the incomprehensibility of her language actually only further proves that she has a unique relationship with Shiva which men cannot replicate by simply taking on feminine archetypes, thus providing her with increased religious authority.

In this final vakh, Lalla describes a vision she has which captures the internal nature of her relationship with Shiva, the special powers this relationship gives her, and the complete disregard she has for worldly life. She writes:

I, Lalla, came through the gate of my soul’s jasmine garden
and found Shiva and Shakti there, locked in love!
Drunk with joy, I threw myself into the lake of nectar.
Who cares if I’m a dead woman walking!¹⁹⁴

The presence of Lalla’s signature in this vakh reflects the personal reflective tone it takes on. She specifically points out that this vision is occurring in her interior world, as she describes herself going through “the gate of my soul’s jasmine garden.” This striking description of her soul comes from the fact that the word “sōman” in this vakh could mean both “soul” or “my own mind,” as well as being the Persian word for jasmine. This is pointed out in the notes to both the Hoskote and Grierson translation, demonstrating the ambiguity which has always lied at the heart of Lalla’s writing and which interpreters can only attempt to understand by allowing for multiple meanings to exist at the same time.

Once through the gate of her soul, Lalla describes bearing witness to what Hoskote describes as, “the most exalted experience cherished by the Tantric philosophy.”¹⁹⁵ The sexual

¹⁹⁴ Hoskote and Laldyada, *I, Lalla*, 68

¹⁹⁵ Hoskote and Laldyada, *I, Lalla*, 244.

union between Shiva and Shakti described here acts as a symbol for the dissolving of all binaries and the arising of an enlightened soul untethered to the earthly realm. The fact that Lalla describes this in terms of Shiva's relationship with Shakti demonstrates the nonsectarian way she understands the spiritual experience, not solely following the monistic sect of Shiva worship in Kashmir, but allowing for the influence of other sects and deities, as well. Witnessing this union makes Lalla "drunk with joy," reflecting how she can only find contentment in her internal world in which fully embodied union can exist. However, unlike Hildegard and Mechthild, this does not produce a relief from madness but, rather, a more positive aspect of madness, as she is not just joyous, but drunk with joy. This is similar to the way she and Mahadeviyakka frequently describe themselves as mad with love. So overwhelmed with this joyousness, Lalla throws herself into the lake of nectar where Shiva and Shakti experience their union, demonstrating the unrelenting desire Lalla has for encounters with Shiva which are completely unmediated by any outside forces or the presence of corporeal bodies. This sense of Lalla dissolving herself into this union comes through more clearly in the Grierson translation which describes her as, "absorbed in the lake of nectar."

The final line of this vakh could take on many meanings. Thus, looking at the Grierson translation provides fuller insight into what might be meant by Lalla's words. Grierson translates the final line of this same vakh as, "Now, what can (existence) do unto me? For even though alive, I shall in it be dead."¹⁹⁶ This, considered alongside the Hoskote translation, suggests that Lalla understands herself not as literally dead, but dead to the earthly world which she leaves behind through union with Shiva. The protection from the outside world which this grants her is indicated by her asking, "Now, what can (existence) do unto me?" This radical challenge to the outside world demonstrates the assurance she finds in the way she is mad with love of Shiva as it

¹⁹⁶ Laldyada and Grierson, *Lalla-Vakyani or the Wise Sayings of Lal-Ded - A Mystic Poetess of Ancient Kashmir*, 85.

is this which, though impossible for those on the earthly plane to comprehend, raises her from the madness of the social realm and allows her to experience unmediated and absolute union with Shiva.

Conclusion

In the process of writing this project I have become closely acquainted with these four women and have only grown increasingly amazed by the radical self-determination which they exhibited by writing and sharing their religious experiences. The circumstances of the world all four of these women were born into are a nightmare for any “modern woman” to imagine. Completely reduced to the functions of their bodies, women were understood only to exist either as mothers or whores. While there were obviously some women who were able to operate independently in the social sphere with jobs selling goods or doing women’s work, the vast majority of women at this time, in both Europe and Southern Asia, were operating entirely in the domestic sphere. This has often been assumed to have removed women entirely from the world of artistry, literacy, and creativity as a whole. However, as the women of this project demonstrate, the interior world is a powerful space which can cultivate originality and artistic expression even when everything in the outer world is saying you cannot.

Clearly brimming with creativity and a desire for something bigger than the subordinate roles which had been assigned to women for thousands of years, these women looked to God, not just for answers or enlightenment, but for companionship and comfort. Yet, even in this religious world there still existed structures which inhibited women and wove their subordination into their very rituals and holy texts. Although these women could not enact actual structural change in their religious communities, they found a way to fight against this subordination through their own creative language. Centering the experiences of their body in a way which empowered them, rather than reducing them solely to their bodies, allowed them to speak about God in a deeply innovative way, completely unique to women. Making ritual internal allowed them to grant themselves a God-given authority which highlighted the triviality of the rituals of men in

contrast to their own immediate experience of God. Finally, centering madness in their writing, either as induced or alleviated by union with God, allowed them to display their absolute commitment to devotion and the way in which religious life had been bestowed upon them by powers beyond their control and which they are unable to deny. These women spent their entire lives developing and cultivating their internal world. As such, their writings can be understood as their desperate attempts to communicate this internal world and the experiences they have of God within it to an outside world which has done nothing but treat them as weak and lowly. In the face of this, they accept this understanding of themselves by entirely reinventing it, finding that it is from this lowly position that they can experience God the most vividly.

The deeply contradictory, maddening, and beautiful lives of the women in this project finds a visual counterpart in Jules Bastien-Lepage's painting "Joan of Arc." Although the painting depicts an entirely different mystic and was created many centuries after the lives of the women in this project, the way Bastien-Lepage captures Joan in the midst of a vision speaks to the life of all religious women throughout history. To Joan's right, in the painting, stands a spinning loom and a knocked over stool. One imagines Joan making valiant attempts to perform her woman's work, to not be a hindrance to her family, but, despite this, God compels her to do otherwise. Joan's hand is outstretched, barely grasping a branch which keeps her tied to this earthly plane. Her feet are bare and clenched in the dirt beneath them. She appears as much a part of the natural world of the painting as the tree or the sky. Curiously, Bastien-Lepage has placed the saintly subjects of Joan's vision not in front of her, but directly behind her, floating above the ground near her spinning loom in a state of semi-transparency. Amongst this, Joan's face carries an overwhelming amount of expression: both longing and fearful, anguished and ecstatic, amazed and terrified.

With the divine and otherworldly always behind her, Joan cannot look directly at the face of her visions which are permanently just out of reach. This is what Mahadeviyakka describes when she asks, “O lord white as jasmine/ filling and filled by all/ why don’t you show me your face?”¹⁹⁷ This is how Mechthild describes her experience of God, stating, “It rises almost up to God, yet remains small in itself. It grasps much and retains little. Ah, most blessed love! where are those who know thee?”¹⁹⁸ While they know God is with them through the experiences of their body and mind, they cannot look at him directly in the way they would like and which would act as the ultimate proof of what they innately know to be true and which others doubt. However, at the same time as God being behind them keeps him permanently out of reach, it also acts as a constant invisible support in the face of a world which does not believe their experiences. Even though they can’t always see it directly, God is constantly with them and pushes them to share his message with others. With God behind them, these women could dare to articulate their interior encounters with the divine to a world which understood them as fundamentally out of place in both the social and religious spheres. By making a place for themselves in their interior world which allowed for union with God, these female mystics, by extension, established a place for themselves in the records of religious history.

¹⁹⁷ Ramanujan, *Speaking of Śiva*, 122.

¹⁹⁸ Mechthild (of Magdeburg), *The Revelations of Mechthild of Magdeburg (1210-1297)*, 110.



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¹⁹⁹ 'Jules Bastien-Lepage | Joan of Arc', *The Metropolitan Museum of Art*, accessed 30 April 2023, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/435621>.

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